

MAGFADDEN
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WORKS

A lone rancher pits his guts
against the fast guns
of two rustlers

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Killers Two

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Original title:
KEEP OFF MY RANCH

"BARBED WIRE MEANS BLOODSHED,"

warned old Race Greer when Jim Woodbine brought a carload of wire to the Circle W.

"Nobody's going to tell me I can't fence my own land," snapped Jim. But he knew it meant war, for the range was thirsty and the fence would cut Noble Fry off from Pecan Creek. And Fry was powerful—with enough hired gunslicks to back any play he made.

Jim had only his flailing fists and a fast gun—the odds were bad.

KILLERS TWO

(Original title: *Keep Off My Ranch*)

Allan K. Echols

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A MACFADDEN BOOK

**THIS BOOK CONTAINS THE COMPLETE TEXT
OF THE HARDBOUND EDITION**

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ON this Spring morning Jim Woodbine felt the tension blanketing Ashfork like a wave of oppressive heat. For a Saturday there were very few rigs and saddle-horses at the hitchracks, and he smiled grimly as he observed this. It was better not to be around if lead started whining, and there were those who expected guns to pop on this day if he brought in the carload of barbed wire as he had planned to do.

Woodbine turned into the Elite Livery and Boarding Stable and slid off his short-coupled bay quarterhorse, a lean man with a face more grave than it should be in a person on the near side of thirty. His corduroy pants hung loosely on his long legs, and the flannel shirt open at the neck showed a touch of shaving powder that hadn't been wiped off after he had finished with his razor. There was something about him that suggested a pine tree that had passed through more storms than its years warranted, a sober ruggedness that trouble had been unable to destroy.

Old Race Greer took his horse and remarked, "So you're really gonna start fencing, huh?"

Woodbine looked at him with uncomfortable directness. "That's what I'd planned. Why shouldn't I?"

Greer said, "Oh, no reason at all. Man's got a right to fence his own land if he wants to."

"That's what I thought."

Old Greer led the horse back to a stable, mumbling to himself, Why shouldn't he? Because Noble Fry says no, that's why.

Woodbine watched the retreating figure of the liveryman while he rolled a cigarette for himself and speculated on the gossip that must be running through the town and the outlying districts. They were probably laying bets on whether he dared fence his property and Virginia Sterling's against the opposition of Fry.

He scratched a match and lit his cigarette in his cupped hands, blew the match out carefully and went out of the stable, walking down to Merle Roberson's Trading Company. In the store he passed down a lane of nail and staple kegs, and kegs of horseshoes with three or four shoes hung on their rims, past a platform stacked high with sacks of flour in dressgoods bags, and came to a railed-in corner where Roberson sat behind a flat-top desk making out checks for bills. He went in through a swing gate and sat down on a straight-back wooden chair beside Roberson's desk.

Roberson scratched his name on a check, pinned it to a bill and addressed the envelope and shoved the bill and check inside, then carefully licked the envelope and stamped it, all before looking up.

Woodbine picked up an upright tin cigar box with a picture on it of an eagle with a snake in its mouth, and the words, "Mexican Commerce," printed on it. He took a cigar out of the box, bit off the end and lit it, and thought that Merle Roberson was taking so much time with the envelope so that he could plan what he was going to say.

Then Roberson laid the envelope aside, leaned back in his chair and smiled, and his smile was a little thin and uneasy. "Well, what can I do for you, Jim?"

Woodbine pulled a list out of his pocket and read it aloud.

"I want you to put this stuff out on your back dock for me to pick up when we're through unloading the car," he said. "Four pairs of posthole diggers, four of those new kind of fencing pliers, you know, with the cutters and the staple puller built into 'em, and about three kegs of fencing staples."

Roberson scratched the items down on a sheet of

paper silently, then looked up over his glasses. "You sure you're going on with this, Jim?"

"Why not?" Woodbine returned with a trace of impatience. "You can't hold back progress any more than you can hold back a rain cloud, even if you had a right to. And nobody's got a right to tell me I can't fence my own land if I want to."

"No," Roberson agreed. "But when you're doing it just to injure a neighbor . . ."

"Is that what Fry is claiming?" Woodbine snapped. "I thought you could see clearer than that."

Roberson shrugged. "That's what he's telling—and you won't talk. What can we believe?"

"All right, I'll tell you once, and you can suit yourself which side you believe," Woodbine said briskly. "I know you do business with everybody, and you've got to sit on the fence, but at least you'll know what the truth is."

He picked up Roberson's pencil and an empty envelope, and drew a rough sketch.

"Pecan Creek runs through our two places for a distance of eight miles; through ten sections of my land and six sections of Sterling land. Fry's ten sections lie to the north of us, and when the ravines are dry his cattle have to cross our land to get to the creek to water.

"Now here's the trouble. When the ravines are dry, his cattle come to the creek to water, but when they graze, they hang around close to water, which means that they are grazing our grass. In short, at the very time when our graze is scarcest, we've got to stand by and watch Fry's stock eating it up. And he's got twice as much stock as we have, so he's getting more good off our graze than we are. We're just furnishing him feed to make money, while we have to sell off early because his stock has eaten all our grass. We either fence or go broke—so I'm fencing."

"And what will Fry do for water? He claims you'll cut him off entirely, and he can't raise cattle without water."

"That's not so! He can do what we're doing; dam

up the ravines and catch his run-off water in ponds. He doesn't want to spend the money to do that. But even so, it's against the law to fence a public stream, and we're not doing that. Also, according to law, we'll leave a crossroad at every section line. Fry's cattle can take those crossroads down to the creek from his land. He knows that; what's he mad about is that his cows won't get to fatten on our grass any longer."

Roberson sighed. "I see. But it means war, Jim. You're right legally, but you'll never make an open range man see that."

"I found that out. I tried to show him that we'd all make more money under fence, but he can't see it."

"Fry don't make threats," Roberson warned, "but you know he'll fight. He won't back down from his position."

"I know that. But I can't back down without quitting the cattle business entirely."

Roberson ran his hand through his hair. "It means bloodshed if you try to unload that car of wire. You know Fry is in town?"

"I supposed he would be."

"Well, if you're determined, I guess nothing short of a bullet will stop you. Did you know that Virginia is back? She's at the hotel waiting for somebody to take her out home."

"I suppose Fry will see that she gets out all right."

"Not if she hears about what is happening."

"I'd better see her, then."

"And get her out of town," Roberson said. "She'd take you and Fry and butt your heads together if she knew what was up. She wouldn't have let you and Bob Burnham talk her into fencing along with you if she'd known it would have made trouble."

Woodbine got to his feet. "This part of the job would have been over by now if the wire had come in time. I told Bob to write and see if he couldn't persuade her to stay at her aunt's another week."

Roberson was thoughtful a moment, then asked with sudden resolve, "Maybe this is none of my business,

but I'd like to know just what's behind this. It's more than just a matter of fencing."

"The fencing angle is enough, isn't it?" Woodbine countered.

"For the public, yes. But not for me. After all, I'm Virginia's uncle, and her only male relative. I've got a kind of personal interest, I suppose."

Woodbine came to a quick decision. "All right, then, but what I tell you has got to be in confidence."

"I'm not noted for talking too much."

"Well, I can't prove a thing, but I'm sure of what I'm talking about. You know Fry. He's hungry for a dollar and he won't let anything stand in his way of getting it as long as he's got a leg to stand on. He wants Virginia, but I don't believe he would want her if it wasn't for her land."

"And you want her, too."

"I don't," Woodbine answered quickly. "We were raised together. I've been fighting with her from the time she's been old enough to annoy me. I'd just as soon marry a she wildcat, but I like her as a friend and neighbor. I don't want to see her hurt, and if she doesn't wake up, Fry's going to hurt her."

"He's older than she is, and probably has a lot more sense," Roberson admitted. "But after all, she's grown and has a right to do what she likes. It looks like you're trying to protect her whether she wants to be protected or not."

"I am," Woodbine admitted. "I've got reason to believe that Moody Shay killed her dad just to get him out of Noble Fry's way, so Fry could have a clear field to try to get her and her land."

"That's a serious charge," Roberson reminded him.

"I know it is, and I can't prove it. That's why I hadn't spoken of it before, and why I told you this had to be in confidence."

"Are you trying to prove it?"

"Not directly. I know I couldn't convince Virginia of Fry's guilt just by talking to her. But I can make Fry show his hand so she can see it. That's the only chance I've got."

"But do you have to? Why can't you just drop it if you can't prove it?"

"Because if I dropped it there'd be no stopping Fry. He'd destroy Virginia and get her land, and then he'd go on to be so big that he'd get control of this whole community and ruin everybody else, including me. He's an octopus and he's got to be stopped before he gets too strong."

Roberson pondered this and then spoke sadly. "I don't question you, Jim. But you're biting off a big slice of trouble. I don't know how you and Burnham persuaded Virginia to fence her land without talking with Fry first, but when she finds out that Fry is against it, she's going to be hard to manage. So you'll have her against you even while you're fighting for her."

"I know it," Woodbine admitted. "But we never could have got started if we hadn't done it that way. Burnham sees it my way, and he talked her into it. He got her to go visit her aunt, then wrote to her and got her to agree to fence. We'd have had the job done by now if we could have got the wire in time. We'll just have to face things as they come up, now."

"They'll come up fast enough," Roberson sighed. "Everybody in town is looking for a showdown gunbattle the minute you start unloading that car of wire."

Woodbine looked out the rear window of the office. Down the block a railroad spur came to an end with the two rails drawn together and upward to a post. A small low station building and shed stood unpainted and dreary at the rail's end, and to the left of it a freight dock. Still farther on were a series of cattle pens and loading chutes.

The pens contained twenty-five or thirty horses, and more than a dozen wagons stood around, empty shafts on the ground and their horses' harness on the spring seats. Woodbine had scoured the countryside to find enough wagons and teams, and men willing to drive them in the face of opposition, to haul the wire when it came.

"Wonder when they'll get it in?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Any time now. I 'phoned Kiowa, and the switch engine has already left there."

Woodbine went out, walked down the dusty board walk towards the Rattlesnake Bar in the next block. As he approached the corner by The Drovers' Bank he saw three men running down the lone cross street in the direction of the railroad station, and he turned his gaze towards them.

He saw a circle of men gathered, attracted by the smell of trouble as buzzards gather at the approaching death of a calf, and he made his way towards them.

As he approached the men he heard a taunting voice urging, "Give it to him, Blocker, he asked for it. Whip him all over the street."

Woodbine pushed a hole in the crowd with his shoulder and got into the inner open space of the circle, where he saw Blocker, one of the drivers he had hired, standing on widespread legs, his hat upside down in the dust at his feet, his hair mussed and dust on the back of his sweaty shirt and the seat of his overalls. A stream of blood trickled from his nostrils and down the corner of his mouth.

The man facing him was Moody Shay, who lived down on Pecan Creek and often worked for Fry. Moody had the mind of a fox in the body of a giant grizzly bear, and now having already hit the unarmed Blocker, the fence-post chopper, he was standing back and unbuckling his gunbelt, a sly, hungry grin on his face.

He handed his gun and belt to a man beside him and began slowly rolling up his sleeves, taking his time so that he could relish every moment of his greedy anticipation.

"So," he said tauntingly, "you call me a liar right in the presence of my friends."

"I didn't call you a liar," the youth said heatedly, and yet with visible fear. "I was just going along minding my own business."

Moody grinned at the crowd. "He calls me a liar again. He says I lied when I said he called me a liar. That makes it double, and I can't stand by and have

him call me a liar every time I open my mouth, now can I?"

"I didn't call you a liar in the first place. I wasn't bein' unfriendly to the Frying Pan because I tried to make a day's wages hauling a load of stuff for Woodbine."

"That's 'right you did. But that's the same as calling me a liar because I told you it would be right unfriendly to me and Noble if you did haul that load. Barbed wire! You haulin' barbed wire for Woodbine and saying I was a liar for calling that an unfriendly act. Well, friend, you just can't keep on calling me a liar like that. My self respect won't permit it, and now I'm going to bust you wide open. I'm going to rip your skin clean off your body with my fingernails and throw it over a fence to dry. I'm going to tear all the flesh off that lanky skeleton of yours and chase you down the street in your bare bones, and then I'm going to yank your bones off one at a time and throw them to the dogs. And then maybe you'll call me a liar some more."

The boy from the hills was having a battle with himself. It was as clear to him as it was to the onlookers that he was in for a brutal beating, and his instincts told him to take out and try to save his skin. But the native pride of the youth held him back, and the conflict between his two desires left his face grey and his tongue dry.

Moody enjoyed the effect he had on the youth, and he eyed him with amused satisfaction while he gave the crowd time to appreciate it. He was in no hurry to start the slaughter, but, like a cat with a rat, he would squeeze the last drop of pleasure out of the scene, both because he liked it this way and because it would have its effect on the crowd.

Woodbine turned his eyes and swept the crowd of onlookers with his critical gaze, and he saw cruel anticipation in their faces as well. This was a queer thing, he noted, for they were just plain everyday men, some from town and some from the country. They were men who did their day's work and had their day's fun, and they were no better nor no worse in-

dividually than any men. But they were not individuals now, they were responding to that atavistic urge in the human to run in packs like wolves, and they had the wolf smell on them when they were in packs, and their craving was for blood. And though there was not a man among them who had any personal liking for the brutish Moody Shay, whom they all knew to have a record obscured by darkness, he was now the pack's champion who would satisfy their bloodlust, for that is the way men are.

There were these things going on beneath the surface of this street fight, and Woodbine saw them clearly, though the crowd did not. He knew also that Shay saw them, for despite his grossness, Shay had a strong streak of animal cunning and an instinctive knowledge of the forces that moved beneath the surface around him. And this made him all the more dangerous a man. For Shay, knowing that these men despised him, got a kind of amused satisfaction out of seeing them waiting for him to satisfy their animal instincts while hating him for doing it. Shay knew that these men wished that the youth from the hills would beat him into a pulp, but he knew and they knew their hopes could not be realised.

Woodbine had broken through the circle at a point where he had not been under the eyes of Shay, but gradually the eyes of the crowd had focused on Woodbine, and had read the significance of his unexpected presence, and so all of them had shifted their attention to him.

Shay, seeing this, had turned, and now he saw Woodbine for the first time. Woodbine stood in the edge of the circle, his arms crossed over his shirt front, his hand a considerable distance from his gun.

Shay's face underwent a change, the anticipatory grin wiping from his features with the flash of light. He ceased rolling his sleeves, and his hands dropped to his sides, while he studied Woodbine attentively, calculating what changes in circumstances he had brought with him. Shay was figuring what turn this sudden shift in affairs would necessitate. Now as the two men

faced each other an uncomfortable silence fell over the crowd.

Woodbine said easily, "Hello there, Blocker. How's everything?" and then turned and said, "How are you, Shay?"

Moody grabbed at the chance for more time to think, and his face broke into a smile. "How, yourself, Jim. Long time no see."

Woodbine said easily, his eyes meeting those of Shay, "No, I don't get into town very often. Been busy, riding here and there, up around the head of Pecan Creek. You ought to ride up that way some time. Good hunting."

Moody Shay's mouth was open easily, his thick lips loose as he watched Woodbine sharply. He took the words and turned them over in his mind, and he knew that Jim Woodbine was telling him something, warning him. And he knew he would have to take more time to think this warning out before he would know what to do about it.

"Yeah," he said softly. "I might take my gun and ride up that way some time."

"You like to shoot up that way, don't you?"

Shay kept the easy smile on his face while his eyes tried to read the meaning behind this. "Sure. I like to shoot wherever there's anything to shoot."

Woodbine did not remark on this statement, and the crowd moved restlessly. They sensed that there was something behind these words, and it annoyed them that they could not make out what it was. They tried to read it on Moody's face and they tried to read it on Jim Woodbine's, and what they saw told them nothing and made them impatient. They waited to hear more, to get more words they could examine to see what lay behind them. And Woodbine left them out on a limb and hanging there, for he did not continue along those lines.

They looked at Moody Shay, knowing that Woodbine had thrown it into his lap, and they wanted to see what he was going to do with it. It was his next move, and they shuffled and waited.

Moody saw these things, and knew that it was his move. His eyes went from Woodbine to the crowd and to Blocker, who had stood waiting to see how long his reprieve was going to last. Blocker stood in front of him, and he could go on with his fight. The crowd was waiting to see if he would do this, and if he did, it would add to his stature. Provided he got over the hurdle of Woodbine's cryptic words.

He weighed these things in the balance, then made an indifferent shrug with his shoulders. He laughed easily. "Aw, well, I'll be seeing you around, Woodbine."

He turned and took his gun from the man holding it, attended to the buckling of it around his hips, then pushed through the crowd and walked on up towards the Parisian Bar.

The air went out of the combined lungs of the whole crowd in one great puff like the deflation of a carcass that had lain in the sun too long, and somebody said, "Well, I'll be double-dogged damned. I'd never thought to see the day that anybody whipped Moody Shay without doubling a fist."

The crowd was disintegrating like a clod in the rain, and the man answering the other one said as they drifted away. "He didn't whip Moody. There's a polecat in the woodpile somewhere. They was talking over our heads, and Woodbine was somehow threatening him, maybe with something he knowed about Moody. Moody got it and was afraid to go on and lick Blocker. Wonder what it could have been?"

"Reckon that's it?"

"It's bound to be. There ain't a man in this neck of the woods that can stand up to Shay with his fists, and Shay ain't afraid of a thing that walks on two legs. No sir, Woodbine somehow give him something to think about, and so he allowed he'd better wait and think about it before he done anything. I'm telling you for sure, that ain't the end of this."

"I'd kinda liked to have seen that fight."

"I wouldn't. Shay would have butchered that kid up something brutal. He's plumb vicious inside."

"I reckon you're right. Maybe it wasn't nothing for

us to be proud of to stand around and watch a kid get his guts stomped out by a man twice as big and twice as mean. Still and all—”

“We'll see a fight yet,” the other promised. “You can't leave a thing like that up in the air.”

“Maybe not. Suppose Woodbine was to bring in that wire like he says he'd do. Not that he's likely to buck Noble Fry, but if he was to, I doubt if Fry would leave enough of him for Shay to work on.”

WOODBINE and young Blocker walked on towards the Rattlesnake Bar, and Woodbine said to the youth, "I told you all to stick together, and not to go unarmed. This is not a game we're playing. How'd he happen to get you cut out of the herd?"

"I broke a hamestrap coming in last night and had to get a new one and take it down and put on my harness. Shay rode into town by himself and saw me down there, so he came back after he tied his horse and caught me headed back to the bunch."

"Where's your gun?"

"I left it in my wagon."

"I told you about being caught without it."

"I figgered if Shay jumped me and I had my gun on, he'd kill me sure as hell. I can't outshoot a regular gunman, so I took it off. He couldn't very well shoot me unarmed, and I'd rather take a whipping with his fists than to get shot."

"You've got more sense than I thought you had," Woodbine admitted as they turned into the Rattlesnake.

His men were there, fifteen or twenty cowhands, log haulers and farmers who had let the high wages Woodbine offered overcome their doubts of Woodbine's ability to buck Noble Fry. They all wore guns.

Woodbine went over and joined Bob Burnham at the end of the mahogany. Bob was in his sixties, grizzled and quiet. He had been foreman for old Abner Sterling until Ab's death, and he had stayed on to run the

place for Virginia, saying that she needed a boss to keep a tight rein on her. The fact was that she ran him.

Burnham said, "Fry's got his men over at the Parisian. Got some new hands that look pretty salty. Probably twenty, counting old and new. Think we ought to go through with it?"

"You know any better time?"

Burnham shrugged. "Virginia will have a fit when she comes home and finds out there's been a battle."

"She's home. At the hotel. How about sending one of your men up and seeing if they can get her started to the ranch before this thing breaks?"

Burnham groaned. "Why don't you? You know if she smells a mouse she'll be down here jerking both of our hair out by the roots." He lifted his hat and mopped his bald head. "If she's here, we won't move a spool of that wire as long as Fry is against it. She is dead set against trouble. I got her out of town long enough for that wire to be delivered, but you couldn't get it here in time—so it's up to you."

"Then she can just pull up a chair and watch us unload it," Woodbine said evenly. "She's got almost as much money tied up in it as I have, and I'm not going to let it sit on the siding and rust."

"She can stop us from fencing her land."

"Sure, if you can't keep her persuaded that it's the right thing to do."

"It's me against Fry, and she's got a lot of faith in him."

"Too much," Woodbine admitted. "If we could have got that wire shipped in time to have had the fencing finished, I believe he would have shown his hand by now and she would have seen what kind of an hombre he is."

"But we didn't," Burnham mourned, "and now the fat's in the fire. I bet we don't fence an acre."

"We fence all of mine no matter what she says," Woodbine answered.

"If Noble Fry lets us," Bob Burnham grinned. "He's done spoke his piece in public, and he can't afford not to back it up."

"In that case," Woodbine told him, "it's just as good as trying to fence it all. Let's get the boys moving."

He called to his own foreman standing at the other end of the bar. "Jess, you boys ready to shove?"

Jess Hardracker was slightly less than middle-aged, somewhat unnaturally stooped and bowed of legs, and he wore a long mournful pair of moustaches under a large amount of nose. He had a deliberate movement and gestures that gave the impression that life was not really worth the effort a man had to put into the job of living. But, as though accepting the verdict that living could serve no useful purpose, he went about it with the equally strong conviction that there was nothing he could do to remedy matters, and so he made the best of it in a very satisfactory way.

Jess wiped the beer foam off his cherished pair of whiskers and bowlegged over to join Woodbine and Burnham. "Yeah. We got enough men to get the car unloaded on to the dock, and enough wagons to get it all out to the place in two trips per wagon—that is, if this bunch will stand hitched. They ain't any too happy about what Fry is going to do. They're trying to talk themselves into believing that he won't show up at all—that he was just bluffing."

"Fry don't bluff," Woodbine said. "He told me he wouldn't let me unload that wire, and a dozen people heard him. He just can't afford not to try to stop me."

"I was afraid of that," Jess mourned. "Well—" he paused in his speech, as did every man in the room.

The familiar hoot of the switch engine's whistle filled the room and spoke into the ears of the men, as it had done once a week for years when it came around the bend at the end of Pinetop Mountain. But this time it was bringing more than mail and goods for Roberson's Trading Store. Every grunt of the old four-six wheeler brought war closer to Ashfork.

Woodbine's eyes went down the line of the bar, scanning faces, judging the men he had to help him, and the things he saw were not reassuring. These were woodsmen, farmers, a few riders from a couple of the friendly ranches, and his own small crew of riders.

There was not a paid gunman among them. Probably not a one of them had ever looked at a man over the sights of his pistol, and probably all of them hoped they never would have to, knowing that they could not acquit themselves very well. They had been persuaded into this thing, most of them, in the belief that it would not come to a showdown.

Now they knew better.

"You boys drink up and go get your teams harnessed," Woodbine told them cheerfully. "About six of you at a time can spell each other unloading the wire out of the car."

These men finished their drinks hastily, greedily, as though they were afraid they might be the last they would ever taste. Woodbine said, "Anybody who would rather not go can pull out now before we head for the car." But none among them would pull out of the thing he had got himself into.

As the men filed out, Woodbine turned back to Burnham. "You going to try to handle Virginia?"

Burnham wiped his mouth nervously. "Look, Jim, you know she can outsmart me on anything. I'd rather face Noble's gunnies. Why don't you see her?"

Woodbine's grin was rueful. "I probably wouldn't do any better. Let's just forget it, and maybe she'll keep out of the way."

"You'd better not depend on it," Burnham assured him. "Ready?"

They followed their own men out of the saloon. The men were walking grouped closely together as though for protection, and they cast nervous eyes across the street towards the Parisian Bar where Fry's men were collected. There were two faces showing through the window of the Parisian, faces of men reporting their movements to those within, but none of Fry's men came out. Woodbine's group turned the corner and headed down to the station where the engine was slowing down with a freight car and an empty gondola in tow.

At the station the men scattered to their wagons and hitched up their teams. Burnham broke the seal on the

freight car and Woodbine went to the empty coal gondola and looked into it, while the switch engine backed away. The train crew from over at Kiowa knew something was going to happen, for the engine stopped some distance away after Woodbine had signed the bill of lading for the car, the switchman went back to the engine cab and they all waited there, as though expecting to see something.

Burnham noticed this and said to Woodbine, "Well, they've got something to get away in when the trouble starts. We may have to hitch a ride with them."

Woodbine and Burnham together shoved the big sliding door of the boxcar back, revealing the load of shining spools of barbed wire. The first wagon rolled up and came alongside the car. Woodbine called to six men, and they put on leather gloves and climbed into the car of wire and broke the shoring out, their guns flapping on their hips. As the other men got their teams hitched up, they came and hung around the open door of the car while those inside began passing the wire spools out to the first wagon.

The wagon was half loaded before Woodbine called a halt. "Here they come, men," he said quietly. "You fellows in the car get your gloves off. You can't handle a gun with heavy gloves."

There was a stir among the men as they spread out along the side of the car.

Woodbine cautioned them, "Don't any of you get panicky and start pulling triggers. We'll wait and see what Fry's got to say. There may not be any shooting at all, and you be sure you don't shoot until you're shot at."

Woodbine dropped down from the car and walked out towards the approaching group. They were on horseback, moving at a leisurely pace with Noble Fry at the head of the column of about twenty men. Woodbine stood and waited until they came up.

About a hundred feet from the car the column halted and Fry rode on until he was within ten paces of Woodbine, then stopped his horse. Fry was a big man riding a big horse. His face was clean and pink

and well filled out, and he wore fine whipcord riding breeches and a tan shirt open at the neck. His hair was midnight black under his oyster white Stetson, and his eyes were large and deep blue set under heavy black brows. He was cool and unhurried, and there was a solidity about him that suggested granite. Woodbine looked at him carefully and saw again as he had often seen before that the man did not know fear, nor how to turn aside from an objective he had once decided on.

Fry looked over Woodbine's small collection of men and rightly measured them as being of no great threat to him. Satisfied that his own men were more than a match for them, he turned his attention back to Woodbine.

"You're still determined to start a little war?" he asked.

"No. I'm not trying to start a war. I'm just going to fence my ranch."

"There's no use in repeating what I told you," Fry said persuasively. "Barbed wire will ruin this range, and I don't intend to be ruined."

"We've gone over that," Woodbine answered. "You could catch all the water you need if you'd dam your ravines or dig ponds. I can't let myself be ruined because you don't want to spend money to catch your water."

"We've gone over this before. Now I'm telling you for the last time, don't unload another spool of that wire. If you do, my men are going to stop you, and you will be responsible for the deaths of a lot of your neighbors. This is it, Woodbine—the last word."

Woodbine's eyes swept over Fry's crew with Moody Shay at the head of it. "Looks like you've got a bunch of new hands," he observed softly. "Gun-hands, I'd call 'em."

Fry smiled. "You called it right," he said. "You've asked for war, so I've taken the wise course and brought in half a dozen boys who know something about a war. You can't blame me, under the circumstances, can you?"

"No," Woodbine admitted. "But before you move them into action, I'd suggest that you look over my reserves." He turned and shouted at the apparently empty coal car. "All right, boys. The gentleman wants a look at you."

Noble Fry's eyes went to the gondola, and his face went hard.

At Woodbine's shout, ten men raised up behind the steel breastworks of the gondola, and ten hard-bitten faces looked over its edge. Every man in the car was looking at Noble Fry from behind the sights of a Winchester rifle, and every one of the ten rifles was aimed directly at Noble Fry's heart.

"Now," Woodbine said softly, "now that we understand each other, you can turn your dogs loose when it suits you." He turned his back on Fry and said, "All right, boys, go on with your unloading."

Woodbine kept his back to Fry long enough to see his men start moving back on to the job—and long enough to give Fry time enough to let the deadlock sink into his mind. Then he turned back to the man and watched him.

He saw the shock of it still paralyzing Fry's handsome face on which had been registered the strength of his urge to dominate. The man, Woodbine had suspected, had gotten away with a great deal in his lifetime by the use of his own dominating appearance and manner, and perhaps had never been seriously challenged. And now, stopped cold by a contemptuous defiance in the presence of his own men, he was stunned, for he had not expected any such an occurrence. He could only stare at Woodbine without speaking.

The men back of Fry saw that there had been a hitch in his plans, and now Moody Shay pushed his horse up alongside of Fry. He looked at the row of guns in the coal car, and then at Fry.

"How about it?" he asked. "Do we stop 'em or don't we?"

Still Fry didn't answer, and Woodbine smiled coldly at Moody Shay.

"He hasn't yet decided whether he's ready to die now or not. Give him a minute to make up his mind."

Then before Woodbine's eyes, Fry became a changed man. Some of the bluster went out of the man, and it would never again be used against a man who might possibly call his hand. The dominating bully-boy died, but a more dangerous man was born, a man who would use his good brain and his guile and even cruelty to gain his ends. For Noble Fry was a man of insatiable ambition, and that ambition did not die with the death of the blusterer, but lived and grew stronger in the man who had risen from the ashes of his humiliation.

Noble Fry turned and rode back towards town without a word. The puzzled men behind him saw their leader back down before their eyes, and they turned and followed him with an attitude of contempt towards him. They were to change this soon.

Bob Burnham came up and joined Woodbine where he was standing in the dust, and they both watched until Fry and his men turned out of sight around the corner. Burnham shook his head wonderingly.

"Where did you get those gun-hands?" he asked, watching the men crawl out of the gondola.

"Went over to Kiowa and hired 'em yesterday."

"Why didn't you say something about it?"

"And have it leak out so Fry could get set for 'em? I wanted it to surprise him and throw him off balance. It worked."

"I never expected to live to see him back down from a bluff he had made."

"Did you ever see anybody try to back him down before?"

"Come to think about it, no."

"Trouble with him was that he was a creature of habit. He had the habit of expecting people to run before him, and so he wasn't prepared to act when one man failed to do it."

"Well, anyway," Burnham said, wiping his head with a bandanna, "I'm sure glad we whipped him so easy."

"We didn't," Woodbine said. "We've just made him more dangerous."

"How come?"

"He's a man of too much pride. We made a fool out of him, and he's not a man who can stand that. He'll brood over it; it'll eat at his vitals, and it'll poison him inside, because it has shown him that he is afraid. I don't think he knew that before. But he knows it now, and knowing it, he will have to act differently. His pride will demand that he destroy me, and his fear will make him do it in an underhand way. No, Bob, he's not whipped. He's a more dangerous man now than he was when he rode up here."

A SPRING dusk had fallen over Woodbine's ranch, bringing the cooling breezes down from the hills. There had been no further effort to stop the unloading, and now the barbed wire spools were lying three in a group every quarter of a mile along the roadway in front of the ranch. Woodbine and his crew had cut bois d'Arc posts all winter and they had long since been strung out and set one every three paces across the front of his property.

His ten imported gun-hands had joined his own five riders in the bunkhouse, and now smoke curled upwards from the chimney of the cook-stove and drifted lazily away. It was a picture which had always brought peace and relaxation to Woodbine, but now the quiet stillness had a different effect on him. It was ominous, impregnated with the general tension, as though the very air itself were poised, waiting for something to explode.

A curl of dust pinpointed itself on the road to the westward and moved slowly towards him, and after a while Bob Burnham rode up and got out of his saddle. He and Woodbine walked over to the porch and sat down, and the old man wiped his red forehead with a bandanna before speaking.

"Virginia's on the warpath," he said abruptly. "Noble's got to her and convinced her that barbed wire means bloodshed. She says she won't fence unless the whole range gets together and agrees to it. Noble told

her he'd be willing for fences to come if the majority says it's all right."

"Meaning he's got the majority behind him in trying to keep the wire out."

"Sure, he knows what he's doing, but he's got her convinced that it's not him that's making the trouble. I can't understand a girl that's got as much sense as she has, falling for the line that hombre puts over on her. She's as blind as a bat when he starts talking."

"Blinded by his brilliance," Woodbine speculated. "She always admired ambition."

"Anyway, when she agreed to go along with the majority, Noble sent his riders to round up all the ranchers for a meeting at her house to-night. She told me to tell you. Coming?"

Woodbine said, "Sure, but you know the answer already. Everybody not on the creek bottom will be against us, and that's Fry's majority."

"I know, but what are we going to do if the majority says the range stay open?"

"I'm going to fence, just like I started to do."

Burnham shook his head. "I knew you would." He got up and looked off across the grass. "Of course, Virginia's calling us off, so that's that as far as we're concerned. I mean, as a crew. But you know how I feel personally."

"I know," Woodbine agreed. "I hate to lose you, but I know how it is. Nothing personal, Bob."

Burnham kicked the dirt with a gesture of impatience. "Damn it, Jim, a man's got a right to fence his property if he wants to, and Noble knows that as well as anybody. He's starting a war for the benefit of his own pocket-book and pride, and somebody's going to get bad hurt. Virginia ought to be lined up square with you instead of letting Noble make a monkey out of her. I feel like a skunk. I don't know what's happened to the girl's brains."

"Forget it," Woodbine said. "She'll learn."

"Maybe. And maybe it'll be too late. Coming?"

"I think I'll ride over to Churchill's first. I'd like a

talk with old Enos. I'm going to need all the help I can get. I'll be along later."

The Churchill place lay across the creek south of Woodbine's Circle W., and Woodbine crossed the creek and took the trail up to the old man's house.

At the edge of the woods after he had crossed the creek he caught sight of a mounted figure spurring towards him, and although he was not sure of it, he was under the impression that he had seen a second horseman fade into the woods. The light was bad, but he had the impression that the man who disappeared so quickly was Hugh Ambler, a small rancher with a place a few miles up the creek on the same side as the Churchill spread.

He reined up as the approaching figure waved at him, and Amy Churchill rode up beside him.

"Howdy, neighbor," she greeted him. "You sure have been keeping yourself scarce around these parts lately. I was tempted to steal one of your calves, just so you'd come over here looking for it. How goes?"

The girl's voice was casual and bantering, and Woodbine turned it over in his mind, weighing her words. They were too casual. She sat her horse, young and straight as an Indian, and there was a black sheen to her hair and an ivory undertone to her transparent skin which no amount of sun could make rough. Her eyes were misty so that the light made shining crosses in them like those in a star sapphire, except that their pupils were black like the irises, and you could not see deeply into them. She was casual, but she was alert and on guard, and her banter was that of a person talking to give herself time to make up her mind, to form judgments under the cover of her words. Woodbine saw this and wondered about the man she had just left. And he, as she had done, said the usual things.

"Just thought I'd drop by and see your dad," he said easily. "How is he, anyhow?"

The girl's smile was queer. "Have you forgotten that

you saw him in town yesterday? He's about the same as he was then, thanks."

She was mocking him, reading into his mind and letting him know that he was not fooling her. She was always that way, deep and shrewd, and saying things two or three moves ahead of where his mind was working. She was lovely, and to him she had always been a mixture of elusiveness and almost open invitation to explore the innermost recesses of her strange heart. He had often felt a strong longing for her, mixed with a distrust of her agile mind, and this had puzzled him. He had just about reached the conclusion that he was the kind of man who didn't like girls who were very smart. And the way she was acting now, he knew that she had guessed his errand and was mocking him for trying to hide it from her.

He saw that though she was toying with his words, she was studying him even more carefully than when she first came up beside him. And he did not intend to let her worm his business out of him. She was too good at that sort of thing.

"I wanted to see him on business," he said shortly.

"Yes, I know," she answered sweetly. "He's mighty popular right now. More business than he's had in ten years."

Woodbine arched his eyebrows and offered no comment, but his expression was a question. This girl liked to entangle people in their own words too well. Let her do the talking.

She waited for him to question her, and when he didn't, she said with a trace of annoyance, "Yes, everybody's wooing him now. Even Noble Fry. That's what you wanted to know, wasn't it?"

Woodbine had to smile a little. "All right, Amy, let's cut out the fighting. You probably know all about it, anyway. Where's Enos?"

Amy slapped the ends of her reins on her saddle thoughtfully. "All right, you big ox, I've practically thrown myself into your arms a dozen times, and you sat me down like I was still a child. You never did

know that I had grown up. But now you want my friendship. Want to make a deal for it?"

"I'm afraid I haven't got anything that would interest you."

"Stop beating around the bush," she said impatiently. "You have and you know it. All right, you saw me with Hugh Ambler a minute ago, and you know what Pop thinks of Hugh. He might misunderstand things, so, what'll you take to keep your big mouth shut about seeing us together?"

"So?" Woodbine smiled. "You're a big girl now. Well, the secret is yours. I won't beat you over the head with it; so forget I saw it. Now, where's your dad?"

"He was down on Magee Creek meadow all day, and was supposed to be home by now. Noble Fry came by a couple of hours ago and I told him where Pop was, and he rode out to meet him. They'll all probably be in for supper. If you think you and Noble can keep from shooting it out across the table, then come on up and help us wreck a new leg of venison that's in the oven."

"Who was with Fry?"

"Two or three of his boys. I don't remember. You won't let them keep you from having your visit out, will you?"

She was mocking him again, knowing, as she must, that the trouble was brewing.

"Why should I?"

"Well," she answered speculatively, "I thought maybe you were one of those who wouldn't do anything to provoke trouble."

"Did you think I would run from it?"

"You seemed to have been running from me when I tried to marry you, didn't you? I thought you figured I was trouble."

"I didn't know you had tried to marry me!"

"Don't tell me you're that dumb, Jim," the girl laughed, but there was a peculiar quality to her laugh, despite its banter. "Anyway, it's your funeral. Let's ride."

Enos Churchill was an old-timer in these parts, and his house was low and long and sturdy like he had been. Enos was old and stooped now. His hair was white and his clothes fitted him loosely, but he had that seasoned quality about him which matched the hewn oak beams in the ceiling of the big living-room.

Enos had taken his land many years before, and had fought to hold it and to build his acres and his walls about him, but now he was tired, and he had nothing more to interest him except the daughter born to him of a young wife long after he was fifty years old. He had never feared a living man, and he had had to kill more than one of them in his day, but he had never knowingly done an injustice to even his worst enemy.

When Woodbine came in after leaving Amy in the long hall he saw the old man sitting at his flat-topped desk in one corner of the living-room. And with him were Noble Fry and Moody Shay and another of Fry's men whose name Woodbine did not know.

Churchill said, "Howdy, Jim. Take a seat."

The old man seemed lost in thought, and his face was grave. His greeting was neither distant nor cordial enough to indicate to anybody in the room where his sympathy might lie, as he sat here in judgment on what he knew to be an appeal by two factions who were checking the roster of their friends. Churchill had seen his range wars, had even been in them, but he was a weary man now, and all he wanted was peace.

Woodbine's tight face went to Fry and his eyes tried to read in Fry's face whether Fry had got a favorable answer. He judged that he had not, but was not through trying to get one. He turned and looked at the burly Moody Shay, and the burly man licked a new-made cigarette and looked back at him with eyes that crinkled slightly with amusement, as though they had a secret between them.

Out of courtesy to his host, Woodbine had removed his gun before coming into the house, and had hung

it on the horn of his saddle. He noticed that Fry and his party had ignored such a gesture, and wore their weapons, and he saw also that Moody Shay was thinking of the same thing. This was a different set-up than the one in town when Moody had been caught without his weapon, and Moody was flashing that message to him through the faint knowing smile on his face.

Woodbine was caught flatfooted. He dropped into a rawhide chair and pulled out the makings.

Fry turned and looked him over speculatively, could not have failed to see that he was unarmed, and came to a sudden decision. He nodded stiffly without speaking, then turned to the old man, turning his back on Woodbine.

"Enos," he said persuasively, "I've already told you the whole story. It just sums up into this; open range, or fences, which means no range at all. You've spent a lot of years carving out a home for yourself, and you've done the job without fences. Do you want to see this country that you helped make ruined, cut up into little fields of ploughed ground, no water for your stock, nor access to water, no place for your cattle to go when they've grazed off one place? That's what fencing means, cattle without food or water, dead cattle with the buzzards getting fat on their carcasses. Is that what you've spent a lifetime working for? I can't believe it. Enos, your neighbors know you. They know you're as wise as you're honest, and they respect your judgment. If you say no fences, then they'll support you in your judgment, for they'll know you're right. If you permit this fencing, then you'll see bloodshed, and in a sense some of that blood will be on your hands, for you could have prevented it by influencing your neighbors to do the right thing and keep the fences out. It's a great responsibility, for all of us, Enos, but you know we're right, and you're a big enough man to take that responsibility. We need you there at the meeting to-night, Enos, to lend the weight of your judgment to the decision. Your voice raised for the right side will mean peace; if you keep silent, remem-

ber the bloodshed that might flow before this thing is over."

Woodbine sat in his chair with his face bleak and his eyes on his cigarette. He had pictured Fry and Churchill in his mind and he was comparing them in that picture. Although the two men were of about the same height, Churchill's age had taken some of the meat off his bones and had weighted his broad shoulders with a stoop, while Fry was still youngish and filled out and full of energy. But still Churchill, seated, seemed to tower above the other man. It was not physical, Woodbine saw, but a moral stature that made the difference. Fry had spoken, and he had urged the moral force of his cause, but because these were merely canny words used for a selfish motive, they sounded hollow in Woodbine's ears, and the very silence of old Enos Churchill as he sat and weighed the appeal had a greater strength than all Fry's arguments.

When Churchill answered Fry, his words were slow and carefully chosen, and had a finality in them which Fry could not fail to understand.

"I have thought of what you have said," Churchill said. "In my day I have fought men who tried to fence public land. I own land, and I will not fence it. But there is one fact that we cannot avoid. If I wanted to fence my land, no man on earth could stop me, old as I am. Whether Woodbine is wise in fencing his land or not, it is not my business to say. But I do say this, he has a right to fence it if he wants to, and I will not lift a hand to stop him. And I will not take sides in your trouble. I see no other answer to your proposition."

The old man turned and opened the drawer of his desk and started pushing papers around in the drawer, as though he were looking for something, and thus indicated that he had said his last word on the subject.

Noble Fry stood up, hooked his fingers in his belt and took a few nervous steps around his chair while he tried to get his impatience under control. He was wise enough to recognize the indomitable will of the older man, and while the refusal angered him, he carefully

refrained from creating an open breach with Churchill. He was having to play a smarter game now than his former blustering one.

"All right, sir, if that's your decision. I'm disappointed, of course, and I even go so far as to say that I do not believe it will help keep the peace when Woodbine starts his war. But I respect your right to your own judgment."

He turned to Moody Shay. "All right, boys. I guess we'd better be getting on."

Woodbine got to his feet, carefully extinguishing his cigarette and throwing it into the big fireplace.

"I guess, Enos, you've answered me as well as Fry, so I'll be going, too."

Churchill said, "Wait, Jim. I'd like to see you. I have some business with you."

Moody Shay's amused eyes fastened on Woodbine, and the cold smile spread around his thick lips. The cat wasn't going to let the cornered rat escape him this time. He walked over and stood in front of Woodbine.

"I've got a little unfinished business with you, too, haven't I, Woodbine?"

"Have you? About Pecan Creek?"

He saw a bleak veil quickly come and go across the big man's eyes, and the smiling crinkles return.

"No. About you interfering in my personal affairs this morning. You see, I was having my word questioned, and you didn't give me the chance to get satisfaction for that insult. I'll have to get it now while the getting is good."

His massive hand formed a fist and caught Woodbine across the jaw before Woodbine knew it was coming. Woodbine fell half-way across the room, landed against the fireplace and slipped to the floor before he could catch himself. He scrambled back to his feet and took three steps towards Shay.

The unnamed rider stuck his foot out and tripped him, and Woodbine fell sprawling face down on the floor at Shay's feet. Shay hauled off and kicked him in the ribs while he was down, using all his great force, knocking the wind out of Woodbine. Woodbine strug-

gled for his breath as he rolled over out of Shay's reach and got to his feet again. And Shay was coming after him.

Woodbine had not completely recovered his breath, and when Shay reached him he grappled and bored his head into Shay's chest, holding on until he could get his breathing under control again.

But Shay had no intention of letting him get set, and having him off balance, he was prepared to finish him off quickly. He tried to tear Woodbine loose from him in order to get a free swing, but Woodbine clung tightly until he got his lungs pumping. By this time Shay was pounding him in the back of the neck with sharp rabbit punches, trying to paralyze him.

Woodbine turned loose suddenly and stepped backward to give himself room to swing. And then the other rider yanked his gun from his holster, lifted it and hit him on the back of the head with it. Woodbine never saw the blow, but sank to the floor and lay there a long moment while he fought to recover his reeling senses.

The man was dancing in his excitement. "There he is, Moody, finish him."

And Moody was coming in to do that when Churchill's voice stopped him.

Old Enos Churchill had fished his big Beasly model Colt with the drop handle out of his desk and was pointing it at Moody Shay, its muzzle as big as a barrel.

"Stand back, young man," he ordered. "The next man that lays a hand on him, I'll blow a hole in him."

Shay studied the gun in the old man's hand, then studied the old man's face and got his answer there. He backed away, with his hands clear of his own gun. The rider also got his eagerness under control in the face of the weapon in the old man's hand.

Noble Fry, who had been standing back letting these men settle the matter between themselves, rolled a cigarette and waited for developments.

Churchill probably had never shown the dignity and fearless integrity in his make-up that he did then. Old

as he was, his hand was steady on his gun, and though seated, he dominated his own room. He was probably the least stirred of any man there.

He did not speak to Moody Shay nor the nondescript rider, but to Noble Fry.

"Fry," he said with a quiet firmness, "I invited you into my house, but these rowdies you brought with you are only suffered here on your account. You are responsible for their conduct, and it has been that of a couple of polecats. I overlooked the rudeness of the three of you in not taking off your guns when you came in, but I didn't expect that even such trash as they are would use them while a guest in another man's house. I hold you responsible for their acts, since they are your men, and I'm going to have to ask all three of you to get out and not come back. Good night!"

Fry was snapping his fingers, looking for an explanation which would salve the old man's feelings. "But you don't understand, Enos, Woodbine gave Shay cause—"

"I understand that it happened in my house. That's enough. Good night."

Fry was seething inside, as Churchill must have also observed, but even then, Fry did not let his emotions go, but made an effort to appease the old man.

"I'll go, of course, Enos. And I'm sorry about all this. I'll let Shay know how I feel about such an act."

Churchill's face was frigid, and Fry nodded to his men and they all went out. Moody stopped as he passed Woodbine, who had got to his feet, and his eyes crinkled at the corners.

"Looks like somebody's always spoiling our little party, don't it?" he smiled. "Maybe we'll have better luck next time, huh?"

"Yeah," Woodbine answered coldly. "Maybe up at Pecan Creek."

Moody Shay's eyes tightened a moment, and he licked his thick lips. Then he got the smile back.

"Sure. I kinda like that section. Always brings me luck." Then he went out with the others. Woodbine was left alone with old Enos Churchill.

THE girl must have been hovering outside the living-room door during the fight, for now she came in, and seeing Woodbine's bloody head, she rushed over and became concerned about his hurts.

"It's nothing," he assured her, but she insisted on going for water and sponging the scalp wound inflicted by the pistol barrel. The touch of her hands seemed to have something extra special, something personal, in it, as though she were trying to show him the tenderness in her which was reserved especially for him.

When she was finished, he picked up his hat. "I'm sorry I was the cause of a disturbance here," he said, apologizing both to the girl and to her father. "I am at fault for inviting it."

"You were not," Enos Churchill assured him. "Any man is welcome in my house who will conduct himself like a man. You were attacked, and you were right in defending yourself."

The old man scratched his chin wearily. "I know what all this means," he said, "and it is not good. I have done my work, and all I want is peace. I am not going to take sides in the affair. You are welcome here, son, as you always were. But my other friends will be welcome, too, and some of them may be against you. However, nobody else will come into my house again with a gun on his hip. I suppose that just about covers what you wanted to see me about?"

Again Woodbine got to his feet and picked up his

hat. "Yes it does," he answered. "And thanks for the help. Those boys wanted to get real rough."

"You had better watch out for that liver-lipped fellow," the old man said. "I've seen the kind before. Fights for the pleasure of it. You'll tangle with him again."

"You'll stay for supper?" Amy Churchill asked.

The girl had changed from riding clothes to a dress of some grey soft material which had its own way of proving that she was no longer a child but a well-developed young woman, and she had a look in her eyes which verified the revelations made by the dress.

"Thanks, not this time," Woodbine answered "I'm not through with my day's riding yet."

"You're going to Virginia Sterling's?"

Woodbine tried to catch the look in her face as she asked the question, but she had turned her head. "Yes," he answered, "there's to be a meeting there tonight."

"So I heard," she answered. "I hope you enjoy it."

Woodbine laughed briefly. "I doubt that I will," he said, and went to the door.

He was somewhat surprised when she followed him to the porch. "She's a wonderful girl, isn't she?" Amy asked, and there was a queer, deep kind of quality in her voice.

"She's a good neighbor," Woodbine admitted. "I've known her a long time."

Amy was standing so near him that he could see the stars shining in her eyes, and catch a faint odor of the perfume she was wearing. The moonlight made her sleek black hair shine and gave a kind of luminescent quality to her ivory skin.

"Isn't it beautiful here?" she asked. "I think that this is the most beautiful spot in the world when the moon shines on it. Don't you?"

Her voice was as soft as a breeze, and it set his imagination spinning. She was very close to him now and he could see the flurry of emotion crossing her face and the tiny tip of her tongue touch her lips. And when she looked at him there was a direct boldness about it

for a fraction of a minute before she dropped her gaze. He could hear her deep, uneven breathing. And then there was a long moment of silence while she waited for him to frame an answer.

He took a deep breath and said with a forced lightness, "You'd better get indoors. Moonlight is a dangerous weapon for a person to be handling carelessly."

And then he was gone. She stood on the porch watching his form as it faded into the shadows towards his horse. And when she heard the sound of his animal's hoofs on the trail she stood staring into the blackness, wondering. She had set a trap for him, and that trap had affected him, had almost drawn him into her arms, she believed. But he had recognized it and at the last moment had shied away from it. She wondered why, and she could not find the answer, except in the name of Virginia Sterling.

She turned impatiently and went into the house and to her room, and there she went to the mirror and searched the image she saw there, and she could not find any flaw in it, and she was puzzled. Finally she said to herself, he'll still be around—if Fry doesn't kill him. Then she went downstairs to supper.

* * * * *

Woodbine started home, but as he neared the woods lining the creek, some instinct warned him against taking his regular trail. He pulled his animal up a moment, then turned right and headed upstream towards Hugh Ambler's place. Later, he could cross the creek near Ambler's and reach the Sterling place just as quickly as going by his usual route.

Although this precaution had not been necessary, it was only due to the fact of Noble Fry's canny reasoning that there had not been a trap laid for him in the woods on his own land. For as Fry's party had taken that same trail a little earlier, Shay had pulled up beside him and suggested something.

"See that patch of moonlight falling on the trail right there?" Shay said. "If there was a man hid in

that brush he could pick off a rider on the trail just as he hit that light patch. The man would never know what hit him, and anybody he was botherin', he wouldn't bother no more."

Noble Fry turned this over in his mind a moment, then said, "That would be about the dumbest thing a man could do. Maybe he wouldn't be bothered no more by that party, but he'd sure be bothered by others."

"I don't get you."

"We just had trouble at Churchill's, didn't we? We leave Churchill's a few minutes ahead of Woodbine, and next day Woodbine turns up dead with a bullet in his back."

"So does that prove who did it? Since when have bullets got their owner's names wrote on 'em?"

"Your name would be wrote on that bullet, and Churchill would be the man to read the writing. Moody, the trouble with you is that there are things you can't see too well. Like moral force."

"One man's word is as good as another to a jury."

"There, my friend, you're as wrong as a man can be. One man's word is as good as another in the law books, but not in people's minds. It's just like the Declaration of Independence saying all men are born free and equal. It says so in the book, but that don't make it so. It says in the law books that one man's word is as good as another, but that don't make that so, either. No man in this neck of the woods, Moody, no man at all, has got a word that's as good as Churchill's in the eyes of his neighbors. They'd take his word and judgment against the word of fifty men like you, and they'd be right. That's a thing the likes of you can't understand, and never will be able to understand, Moody."

"That kind of talk is Greek to me," Moody grumbled. "I don't understand it, and I don't believe things I can't understand."

"You can understand that I'm not letting you dry-gulch Woodbine now. When you're fighting for your position on a range you've got to keep your nose clean,

and you can't afford to go off half-cocked and do something that will make your neighbors suspicious of you. Just keep your galluses on and we'll get Mister Woodbine where the hair is short, in our own good time, and without any criticism from the boys with touchy morals. Now I'm going on to Sterling's. I want you to ride on into town and hang out in the saloons. Those gun-hands of Woodbine's are not the kind that are going to lie around a bunkhouse like fat cats. See if they're milling around. Get to talking to them and find out if you know any of them, or anybody they know. Find out how much Woodbine's paying them. Feel them out and see if we can wean them away from him with higher wages. Anyway, make friends with any of 'em you see, and see how things stand. And come up to the house when you get back and let me know what you learn."

Moody Shay and the other hand had ridden on to town, and Noble Fry had ridden on to Virginia Sterling's, and Woodbine's trail had not been trapped.

Woodbine himself had ridden past his trail and on to Hugh Ambler's, trying to recall, as he rode, any information he had about the man. It wasn't much. Ambler had come in and taken up a section across Pecan Creek back of the Sterling place about three years ago. He had driven in a few head of grade cattle and two fair-looking bulls, and had turned them loose and set about putting up his buildings. He didn't get around much, and few people knew anything about him.

Ambler had dropped in to round-up each Spring and Fall, had done his share, and had taken his cut, branding the calves, and driving his stuff back to his own land to turn loose again near his quarters. He was a big sized man, easy to get along with on roundup, and could do more than his share of work. But he still didn't have very much land or very many cows running on the open land. He was just a small-timer who people saw around but didn't know very well.

Woodbine stopped his horse in a clearing when he saw the light in Ambler's small cabin, and called out

the man's name. Ambler blew out his light, came to the door and shouted, "Who is it?"

Woodbine noted the man's caution. "Woodbine. Wanted to have a talk with you."

The man stepped out into the moonlight, and Woodbine saw he had had his gun belted on.

"Light," the man said, and Woodbine dismounted and went to meet him. He had never visited the man before, and had rarely seen him except twice a year on round-up, and had an occasional glimpse of him from time to time along the creek bottom.

The man did not try to pave the way for an easy conversation by the usual casual remark, but waited for Woodbine to state his business.

"There's going to be a meeting over at Sterling's to-night. I was headed that way, and stopped off to see if you were going."

"Hadn't figured on it," the man answered. He was not acting cold, but he was letting Woodbine do all the talking.

"Heard about it?"

"Yes."

"Then you know it's about fencing. Noble Fry and some of the fellows that are not on the creek are against it. Those of us on the creek will keep on feeding their stock unless we fence. They claim fencing will ruin them. I claim that leaving our land open will ruin me and everybody on the creek. You're on the creek. I was hoping you'd see things my way, since it affects you the same as me."

"Yeah," Ambler said. "I've heard the other side, too. I haven't made up my mind yet. Fry's made me an offer. What's yours?"

Ambler was as big a man as Woodbine, and perhaps ten years older. He was broad of shoulder and not too big through the middle, and his face was smooth and healthy, with a pair of alert and bold grey eyes. He carried himself with an air of confidence in his ability, and his attitude now as he asked the question was one of trying to take the initiative in a sudden move.

Woodbine studied the man after this revealing ques-

tion. He had never figured Ambler to be a man with his gun to sell, but here he was dickering his gun to a neighbor in the face of brewing trouble that he should have considered as much his as Woodbine's.

Woodbine turned the question over in his mind, and then asked another, "What's your terms?"

"I'm hemmed in here," Ambler said, "with Churchill in front of me, the mountains back of me, and you folks across the creek between me and the road. You run two sections deep between the creek and the road. I want two sections from you and two sections from Sterling. That'll give me a four section block between you and Sterling, and put me on the road."

Woodbine let the rein slip off his tongue for a moment. "You wouldn't also want my ranch-house and Sterling's, would you? My friend, this is your fight as much as it is ours."

The man shrugged. "It could be. But I might not have to fight it. I know the set-up, and you just haven't got enough men backing you to make a showing. Fry has got all the strength, and if I make a deal with him, I can keep my own place open, and I can get something more after the smoke has cleared away."

"If Fry wins."

"He'll win, and when he does, I'll get mine. I didn't come here to keep on being a little man."

"You won't grow working for Fry."

"He thinks the same way, but he doesn't know me any more than you do. Get this, Woodbine, I'm little now but I'm not going to stay that way. I know Fry's weakness, and I know how to cash on it. I'm a lone wolf, and I throw in with the men that will do me the most good. If Fry thinks he's playing me for a sucker, he's got something to learn. You offer me nothing; Fry offers me part of your land when he drives you off of it, but he don't intend to keep his promise. That don't worry me, Woodbine, it only makes me laugh. I'll get mine out of this shindig. I'm telling you now, mister, don't count me out of the party. You might have made Fry stick his tail between his legs, but I'm not Fry."

I know what gunpowder smells like from both ends of the barrel."

"Thanks for warning me, Ambler. Want to smell some now?"

"I sniff powder when it suits me to smell powder. And that's only when there are blue chips lying on the barrel head."

Woodbine got on his horse. "All right, mister. We know where we stand. Just one more thing occurs to me; keep away from Amy Churchill."

The man bridled at this; Woodbine could tell it by his voice. "What's she to you?"

"Nothing, man. But her father is something to me, and to every decent man within a day's ride of here, if that means anything to you."

He turned his horse and rode with his back to Ambler until he had disappeared into the woods. As he travelled through the woods and across the creek at the ford back of Sterling's, he gave his thoughts to the surprising things Ambler had revealed about himself.

Ambler had suddenly become a force to be watched and reckoned with. Here was a man of too much personal egotism and ambition galling under his jealousy of bigger people who had ignored him, a man whose bitterness was so strong a force within him that at the first opportunity it had exploded to reveal him to the very ones from whom he should have hidden it. Here was a vulture revealing his intention of growing fat on the bodies of his fallen neighbors. He would bear close watching.

WOODBINE rode up to the rambling Sterling ranch-house and circled it in the moonlight, coming to the hitchrail at the front. He was surprised to note that there were no saddle horses tied there as there would have been if the meeting had been in progress. As he dismounted, he looked at the ground and noted that there was much fresh trampled earth, a sign that riders had been here and gone. He tied his horse and went to the door and knocked.

Virginia Sterling came to the door in a new green dress she had apparently brought back on her return from her visit, and the green somehow made her rich auburn hair seem all the redder. She was small, but not wraithlike. Instead there was a simple clean-cut, healthy look about her. Her slightly freckled face looked well-scrubbed rather than made up, giving her beauty a touch of reality rather than mystery. There never was any mystery about Virginia Sterling, except perhaps the mystery of how one small girl could have so much spunk and energy and fire, and yet, in most cases, so much common sense.

She held the door open as Woodbine came in, and her eyes were flashing sparks. She slammed the door behind him and followed him into the big living-room where old Bob Burnham sat smoking his pipe. Bob had always lived in the house with the family. Bob blew out smoke and winked at Woodbine.

The girl folded her arms across her chest and said sharply, "Well, it's about time you showed up. You've

lit a fuse to a box of dynamite that will blow up the whole range, and then you ride off to look at the moon with Amy Churchill, not caring who gets killed. Jim Woodbine, you ought to be ridden out of here on a rail—”

Woodbine had been playing and arguing and dancing and fighting with Virginia since they had been neighboring children, and he did not take her angry spells too seriously. He smiled at her.

“Hold it, honey. Where’s the meeting?”

“The meeting’s all over, and don’t you honey me, you trouble-maker!”

Woodbine saw that this anger was deeper than her usual quick spells which came and went with the wind, and he looked seriously at Bob, who shrugged and thumbed the tobacco down in his pipe, leaving Jim to face the music alone.

“And what did they decide?”

“Just what Noble predicted they would decide; that it would be unfair to everybody to fence our neighbors away from the creek. So, we’re not fencing.”

“You’re not!”

She looked at him, startled. “Do you mean that you’re going to fence anyway, despite what all the neighbors say?”

“Despite what the people who want my grass say. I’m going to fence mine, and you ought to do the same, unless you intend to give up ranching.”

“Jim, you’re crazy. You’re begging for trouble. I can’t understand how a head as thick as yours can contain so little sense as to make you start a war.”

“I’m not starting it. Fry intends to start it if I fence my land. That’s different.”

“It’s not. It’s all the same. It means killing.”

Woodbine gave up trying to convince her. He shrugged. “Do what you want to,” he said. “I’ll take your wire off your hands if you feel that I’ve double-crossed you. I can use it.”

“I don’t want the money for the wire. I just don’t want you to keep on being a fool.”

Old Bob laid his pipe down on the side table. “I’ve

been listening to you two quarrelling and fighting for nearly twenty years," he complained. "I wish you'd settle it once for all. Kiss and make up, why don't you?"

Virginia looked at Woodbine with biting scorn. "Kiss that idiot? I'd just as soon kiss a cactus. Good night!"

She started to turn and leave the room, but suddenly Jim Woodbine caught her wrists and held her facing him, watching the darting fire in her eyes.

An impulse swept through him which was new to him. He watched her face, saw a fleeting expression of surprise sweep through her, and then of wonder. She stood still, her face lifted to his, her lips motionless, as though she were facing something new and startling. He heard a catch in her breath, saw the quick rise and fall of her bosom.

Then he drew her to him with an eager gesture and had her locked in his arms. He bent his head and kissed her, and her mouth was firm for a moment. And then the firmness went out of her lips under the urgency of his kiss, and her two arms found their way around his back. For one brief moment he felt the clinging softness of her, and then it was over.

She was out of his arms, staring at him as though she had never seen him before. Then she turned and ran out of the room without a backward glance, and he stood and listened to the tap of her heels as she ran up the stairway.

Woodbine was shaken, and he wanted to get outside into the darkness alone so that he could examine himself and see what had happened to him. He picked his hat up off the table and strode out the front door and into the moonlight, heading for his horse.

Bob caught up with him before he had got the reins untied from the rail. The old foreman tactfully ignored the unsettling event, and talked of other matters.

"How'd you make out with Enos?" he asked.

"No good! He's going to sit tight in a neutral seat, and you can't blame him, old as he is. Looks like I'm going to have to ride just about a hundred per cent alone in this. I even tackled Ambler."

"Ambler should have come in with you," Bob said. "He's got bottomland grass he'd ought to want to protect."

"That's not his main idea," Woodbine answered. Then he told Burnham about his conversation with the little-known man from across the creek. "So," he said when he had finished, "it looks like we've got a neighbor that might be interesting."

"You don't say," Old Bob said thoughtfully. Then he filled his pipe and lit it while he was deep in thought. "You know, that might tie in with something Virginia said at supper. I didn't pay any attention to it at the time because I had my mind on this other business. Virginia's aunt told her that Hugh Ambler was well known over at Deerlick. She said that he has a ranch near there, and he's understood there to have another big ranch over here. They say he drives a lot of his stock from this ranch over to his other ranch at Deerlick to fatten off before shipping time. Way I get it, those folks allow this is his big ranch, and the Deerlick place just a kind of subsidiary. Kinda funny, ain't it?"

Woodbine turned this puzzling information over in his mind and tried to fit it into the picture he had just got of Ambler. When he had it in place he said, "He hasn't got enough stock of his own here to stock any kind of a feeder lot in Deerlick. And besides, his stock usually shows about the usual increase every round-up time, which it sure couldn't do if he was driving any quantity of it out. So—where's he getting all this stock he's throwing into his Deerlick place?"

"Only one thing he could be doing," Bob said. "Branding sleepers. Plenty of men have got their start that way, and it would be a cinch here in this wooded creek bottom and back in the wooded hills. A man could comb these woods every day with a running iron and stand little chance of getting caught in the act of putting it on a calf and chowsing the calf over to his own side of the creek and throwing it in with his own stuff."

"Yeah," Woodbine agreed, "and as long as he had sense enough not to get so greedy that our herds

didn't show up too small an increase, and as long as he had another ranch clear on the other side of the mountains to drive them to, nobody would ever suspect him."

"That must be the answer to him, then," Bob reckoned. "But it's only a suspicion. All you got to actually go on is him flying off the handle and exposing the kind of critter he is."

"We've got enough to base our suspicions on," Woodbine said. "If he's stocking another ranch with cattle that he claims he's raised in this little shirt-tail spread of his here, then we know he's lying. And we know he's not buying the stuff here. He's getting it from somebody, and our stuff is right under his nose. So, now we know where he stands."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I can't do anything until I can nail him down in something crooked. And I haven't got time to work on that now. I've got my hands full."

"You have that, all right. Know just about where you stand?"

"Exactly. I stand by myself, with only five riding hands that I can depend on, and ten hired gun-hands that'll stick as long as it suits 'em and I've got the money to pay them. And against me I've got Noble Fry with about twenty gun-hands, and all the ranchers that want to live off of the Woodbine and Sterling grass. Also Moody Shay who's playing along with Fry for reasons I don't know, but who also is a backshooter and has a personal grudge against me for what he suspects I know about him. Also ready to pounce on me is Hugh Ambler if he can see any way to cash in on my trouble."

"And Virginia?" the old man asked oddly. "You figured her against you before."

"She doesn't count. She's just an obstinate kid that's got the wrong idea."

"She might have been a kid before, but she quit being that about ten minutes ago," the old foreman observed sagely.

"What do you mean?" Woodbine asked, and felt a confusion within him even as he spoke.

"Don't be a fool, Jim." The old man tapped out his pipe on the heel of his boot. "So," he said, changing the subject abruptly. "What are you going to do now? Wait for the pack to get together and bear down on you?"

"No, I can't get help, so I'm doing it alone. And I'm starting now—with Moody Shay."

"Why Moody? He's just a little fish."

"You think so? I think he's a kind of keystone. If I can pry him loose I believe I can break up the combination against me so I can handle the bunch separately."

"You got anything on him?"

Jim Woodbine pondered this a moment, then came to a decision. "Did it ever occur to you that Virginia's dad was murdered?"

Old Bob was quiet a moment, then he said, "Why, Jim, how can you figger that? We was all deer hunting together. You and me and Noble Fry was in sight of each other when we heard the shot, and old Ab wasn't five hundred yards from us when his gun went off."

"We thought his gun went off. When we got to him he was lying by the barbed wire fence and unconscious, and his gun had a fired shell in it. Any set-up like that would just naturally make anybody think he'd accidentally shot himself trying to get through a fence with a loaded gun, because so many people get shot with their own guns that way."

"Naturally, but why should we think any different about Ab's case? I never even imagined you suspected Noble of killing him."

"I don't suspect Noble of firing the shot. I was practically in sight of Noble when it happened, and Noble couldn't have shot him. I had my suspicions quite a while, but I couldn't figger out any motive for Ab being murdered. Now I can, and I'm going to do something about it. I think Moody Shay shot Ab Sterling!"

"How do you figger that?"

"Remember we took Ab back to camp and sent for a doctor. I helped the doctor cut the bullet out. Ab

was carrying a Winchester rifle. But the bullet that the doctor cut out of him wasn't a Winchester steel-jacketed bullet such as he was using. It was a big lead slug that must have come out of an old Krag. It couldn't have been fired from Ab's gun, so somebody else must have fired it. And I have seen Moody Shay hunting deer with an old Krag. So have you!"

Old Bob Burnham was stunned into silence a moment, then he muttered as though to himself. "And I remember Moody saying in town that he'd been across the state for a week when the accident happened. He had probably been hiding out waiting for Fry to get his trap set. Then he shot Ab, slipped up and ejected a live shell from Ab's gun and replaced it with a fired one. He probably did it just as Ab started to crawl through the fence, and made it look like it was just another hunting accident. But why?"

"That, I'm not sure. But remember it was Noble Fry's idea for us to all go up there deer hunting, when we could have got deer a lot closer home?"

"Jim," Bob Burnham said tensely. "If we'd saved that bullet for proof, I'd go with you right now to face Moody Shay with it."

Jim Woodbine pulled the bullet out of his pocket and held it in his hand in the moonlight. "Here it is. I've saved that bullet for a long time, Bob. To-night I'm going to match it with Moody Shay's old rifle. Are you going with me?"

"Wait till I saddle up and get my gun," the old man said, and turned his steps towards the corral. "You done dragged me into this in spite of what Virginia says."

MOODY SHAY's cabin was up in the hills to the west of Sterling's, and Woodbine and Burnham approached it on foot after they had tied their horses a safe distance from the clearing in which it sat.

"You say Moody wasn't with Fry at the meeting?" Woodbine repeated.

"No. He could be here, or he could be somewhere else."

"If he's not here, I'm going to take a look for that rifle of his anyway. It might not be right—"

"Who cares about that under these circumstances?" Bob snorted. "That hombre ain't got no rights, to my way of thinking. I never heard of him making an honest dollar since he's been in these parts."

When they reached the clearing, Shay's cabin was an unlighted dark blob under a big oak tree. "He might be there asleep, and he might not," Woodbine said. "You take the back door and I'll take the front."

Their precautions were unnecessary, for the men entered the two doors without hearing sounds of life. Woodbine kept his gun at ready and struck a match with his left hand.

"Not here," Burnham said.

Woodbine lit the oil lamp on the table, and they closed the door and began a search for the man's deer rifle. They found the old weapon lying flat on top of a ceiling beam, and Woodbine took possession of it. They took the weapon out with them and rode a mile

in the direction of town before they stopped to examine it.

The gun had four shells in the chamber—and the lead bullets in the shells matched the lead bullet which had killed Virginia Sterling's father, and which Woodbine had carried with him ever since the old man's death, waiting for the break which would help him prove that his old friend had been murdered.

"That does it," old Bob swore. "The dirty skunk. If I'd known this before I'd have come up here and killed him myself. Wonder where we could find him, you reckon?"

"He's not with Fry. He's the kind of hombre that can smell out excitement like a buzzard smells carrion, and there's likely to be excitement in town to-night. People are going to be milling around guessing what's coming next."

"Let's go, then," the old man snapped, slapping his horse with his reins. "I just want to get one good look at that hombre in front of my sights for about two seconds."

"Hold up, Bob," Woodbine said, keeping his pacing animal alongside the old man. "That would spoil the whole business."

"How come? The quicker he's dead the better it is for every one."

"No! Why do you reckon he killed Ab and set it up to look like an accident?"

"I don't know. But what difference does it make why he done it? He done it, didn't he?"

"Yes, but personally I can't think of a reason in the world for him doing it. I've got to find out from him why he killed Ab, and I can't find that out from a dead man."

"Why've you got to find that out?"

"Because if he didn't have a reason of his own for killing Ab, then he must have done the job for somebody who did have a reason. Doesn't that make sense?"

Bob rode in silence turning this over in his mind for some while before he answered. Then he said, "That must be the answer. He connects up with somebody

else. But how're you going to make him tell you what you want to know? You can't hurt him with less than a sledge hammer on his skull, or a bullet in his heart. How are you going to make him talk?"

"I don't know," Woodbine admitted. "I wish I did, but I don't. All I know is that I've got to do it, and so he's got to stay alive."

"Son," Bob said, "you bite off the biggest chews of any young feller I ever knew. One of 'em is going to choke you one of these days."

"I'm choking already," Woodbine said. "I haven't got much more to lose."

They speculated on possible connections between the elements which had opposed Woodbine until at last they cantered into the darkened town and pulled up at the Elite Livery and turned their animals over to Race Greer. Greer looked at them queerly as Woodbine cradled Shay's old rifle in his arm and gave orders. "Don't unsaddle 'em. Just water them and take the bits out of their mouths."

Greer twitched his nose nervously and said, "All right, Jim." The man was practically bursting with tension, but he remembered how Woodbine had cut him short when he had started meddling in the morning, and he managed to hold his tongue.

Bob asked, "Who's in town, Race?"

The question was like puncturing a balloon, and the wind started whistling out. "Fry's men came in earlier and are down at the Parisian, and some of them new men o' Jim's is at the Rattlesnake. Ain't nothing happened yet."

Woodbine's face cracked into a cold smile. "Expecting something to happen, Race?"

"With all them guns lined up agin each other?" Greer answered, surprised. "How could it keep from it?"

"That's simple, Race. If those men are paid gunhands like you say, then they're not going to start throwing lead at each other just for the fun of it on their own time, are they? They'd most likely be satisfied to draw their wages and not have to pop any

shells at all, wouldn't they? How would you feel if you were in their boots?"

"I never looked at it that way," Greer admitted. "Still and all, folks is kinda worried."

As they walked up the darkened street, Bob said, "Everybody in this town is wound up tighter'n the spring of a dollar watch. The sound of a Fourth of July firecracker going off would bounce half the town out of its beds right this minute."

The street was dark except for a few dimmed lights in three or four frame houses, and the lighted windows and batwing doors of the two saloons. They passed Merle Roberson's store and Woodbine stopped. There was a dim light in the office at the rear, and Merle Roberson was working over some papers.

Woodbine reached into his pocket and brought out the lead bullet. "You take this and that rifle of Shay's, and go in and give it to Merle for safe keeping. Tell him everything I've told you up to now."

"How come?" Bob asked suspiciously.

"I'm going down to the Parisian and see Shay."

"I'm going with you."

"No, you're not. There might be some fireworks."

"That's why I was going. A man could get hurt in a roomful of flying bullets."

"That's why you're not going. We both might get hurt, and then who would there be left to see that Moody got what's coming to him? Merle knows what I suspected, and if he's got the evidence, he could get a bunch of decent people together and handle Moody, even if we got shot up. Go on."

"That ain't right," Bob argued.

"Do you remember that Virginia told you to keep out of this?" Woodbine asked. "Who'd look after her? And besides, this is personal between me and Moody. I'm depending on you to get that evidence into Merle's hands safely. See you later."

Woodbine turned abruptly and walked on down towards the Parisian Bar, leaving the old man grumbling to himself on the sidewalk. Finally Bob turned and went into Roberson's.

Woodbine did not let his steps lag, but walked directly down to the Parisian and pushed inward through the swing doors. He stepped inside and slid his back to the wall while his eyes adjusted to the light.

The Parisian was a long, low-ceilinged place filled with smoke and the smell of stale beer. The floor was littered with cigarette butts and the tables and chairs were stained dark and in bad repair. The bartender was leaning over the bar talking to a pair of Fry's gunnies. A few townsmen were scattered about at the bar and tables, and a dozen or more of Fry's men were among them and at the poker tables, all armed. One of the gunnies strolled to the door and disappeared through it.

Woodbine got his eyesight cleared at about the time everybody in the saloon recognized him. He walked to the bar. The buzz in the room died so completely that only the ticking of the big clock and the tap of Woodbine's boot-heels was heard. He stopped at the bar, and his gaze went around the room. He spotted one of his new gun-hands sitting at a table drinking with a couple of Fry's men, and he spoke to the man.

"What are you doing here, Shoat?" he asked.

The lean man with one drooping eye grinned back at Woodbine. "Just run into a couple of old friends of mine. Why?"

"You're not working for me any more. Ride out in the morning and get your warbag and your pay."

The man merely grinned back at him, and Woodbine turned to the bar. "I'm looking for Moody Shay."

"He ain't here." The bartender sucked a gold tooth and grinned.

"Where is he?"

"Did you try the Rattlesnake?" There was a hidden taunt in the answer, as though the bartender were gloating over the idea of Moody Shay invading the bar that was Woodbine territory. "He said he was going to drop in there for a few drinks."

Woodbine looked around and saw a few smirking faces, and he kept his eyes on them until the smirks faded. Then he turned his back to them and went

out and walked down to the Rattlesnake and went in.

The Rattlesnake was a larger and much cleaner place, and like the Parisian, it had its quota of townsmen curious enough to be out on a night like this, and a sprinkling of his own paid gun-hands. Woodbine did not like the idea of gun-hands, but he had no other recourse in the face of Fry's army.

His eyes stopped on Moody Shay. Moody was standing talking to one of Woodbine's gun-hands, his face to the front door so that he saw Woodbine when he came in. Here, too, the buzzing stopped when he came in.

Woodbine took his time looking over the crowd, and as his eyes became accustomed to the light he quickly noted one great difference between this place and the Parisian.

Not a man in this place was armed. Doc Tudery, the proprietor, kept a big square of shelving with pigeon-holes in it back of the bar, and these pigeon-holes were stuffed with guns and holsters. There was a fresh sign written with soap on the back bar mirror which announced that a customer would have to check his guns before being served. To emphasize the importance of this new ruling, Doc had his sawed-off, double-barrel shotgun leaning against the mirror right under the sign. Doc was a quiet man who ran a respectable place, but he ran it, and he kept trouble down.

Woodbine's eyes swept through the room and settled back on Moody Shay. And then he looked the second time before he could be convinced. Moody Shay was not wearing a gun.

It seemed incredible to him that Moody Shay would come into an enemy stronghold and allow his gun to be taken from him.

Woodbine hitched up his own gunbelt and walked down the bar and stopped about five feet beyond Moody. Moody broke off his conversation with the young Woodbine gun-hand and turned and smiled his thick-lipped crooked smile at Woodbine. Then his eyes

went down to Woodbine's gun and his smile spread into a cold laugh.

Woodbine glanced at his man standing with Shay and said, "Get away from the bar."

The tall young fellow shrugged, picked up his bottle and glass and found himself a seat at one of the tables. Several townspeople heard and understood and started for the door, making efforts to appear unhurried while they got out as fast as they could.

Tudery came down the bar and said, "Howdy, Jim. Check your gun?"

The question was asked politely, casually, but Woodbine knew that he was not going to drink in this saloon tonight with his gun on, for the question was also a demand.

Woodbine searched the room with his eyes and he could see nothing out of the way. But there was something wrong here. He could feel it though he could not see it, and his natural caution held him back from answering Tudery for the moment.

There were perhaps a dozen townspeople here, the saddle-maker, the grain and feed man and his brother, and a few others who were, or should have been, neutral in this fight. And there were seven or eight of his newly hired gun-hands. These men had sold their guns to him, and for the moment he could not understand their allowing themselves to be disarmed in a town full of the enemy.

And then he had to smile at himself; he had answered this one to Race Greer only a few minutes before. They had sold their guns to him when he needed them, but they were out on their own time now and not working at their trade, and they would know by the same token that Fry's men would not be looking for a battle either. Both sides were paid to follow their employers when the bullets began to fly, and it wouldn't have made sense for them to go around looking for extra gunwork to do just for the pleasure of it when there was drinking to be done and a possible stem-winding fist fight in the offing.

But that did not account for the laugh on Moody

Shay's face. The trouble was there. Moody knew something; he had somehow figured out an angle favorable to himself, and he was savoring the taste of Woodbine's blood before he had drawn it. Woodbine, with his gun on his hip, studied the unarmed Moody and puzzled over this one for a moment.

Then his mind tore it apart and lay bare Moody Shay's cunning. A gun-fight between them would be a pretty even match, with the odds possibly in favor of Woodbine.

But a fist fight was something else again. Moody Shay outweighed Woodbine by a good seventy-five pounds, and his two-fifty was all bone and muscle. He was of that particular build of which professional strong men and wrestlers are made, light from the waist down, with a big torso of heavy bones overlaid with an armor of thick rawhide muscle. He was a cold and brutal rough-and-tumble fighter who knew no guidance but his own insatiably cruel urge to maim, to tear a man apart and cripple him with his two hands.

And Moody Shay had a strong streak of animal cunning. Woodbine knew now why Moody Shay had taken his gun off. The man who had slipped out of the Parisian had brought word of Woodbine's errand, and Moody Shay had seen a way to get his edge on Woodbine.

Woodbine wearing a gun could not start a fight with an unarmed man. Woodbine would either have to take off his gun and face Moody Shay with fists, or have to back down. And once Shay got Woodbine unarmed—Shay's broad, challenging grin promised the crowd what he would do to Woodbine.

Tudery stood back of his bar waiting for Woodbine's decision. He was a stable man, and his saloon was not a rough house, but he was a human as well. The tension which had built up in the town affected everybody in it, including Tudery. There would be no gun-battle, and since this fight would make history, Tudery came to the conclusion that it would be worth the risk of a little broken furniture to let it work itself out here. He would have a grandstand seat, and the ad-

vertising wouldn't hurt him a bit. Tudery waited patiently for Woodbine to make his decision.

The silence had been breathless, and a cricket chirped loudly in some dark corner, audible to the whole room.

Woodbine stepped back from the bar and unbuckled his gunbelt and threw it on the counter.

"Set me out a bottle of rye," he ordered.

The tension relaxed in a dozen sets of muscles and a dozen men settled down to enjoy the slaughter.

SHAY GETS HIS FIGHT

WOODBINE saw the savage anticipation in the new smile on Shay's face as Tudery took the gunbelt and weapon and stuffed them into one of the pigeon-holes. The big man finished his drink and wiped his coarse mouth with his sleeve. He watched Woodbine pour and drink a glass of whiskey.

"Here you are again," Shay grinned. "Almost looks like you was following me around."

"I am. I missed you out on Pecan Creek and over at the Parisian."

"Pecan Creek," Shay repeated. "You've been saying that to me a lot lately. What are you trying to hint at?"

"Had you worried, huh? Trying to figure out just how much I know about Ab Sterling's murder? Well, I've finally got the answer for you. I know it all now; who hired you to murder Ab, and why. Also I've got the gun you used and the bullet the doctor cut out of Ab, which matches up with your ammunition. It's all rounded out and ready to hang you to a cottonwood tree."

Moody Shay laughed long and loud. "One drink and you're seeing things, Woodbine. Ab was killed in a hunting accident." His face went straight for a moment and his eyes bored into Woodbine's face. "What gives you such notions?"

"Ab died as the result of an accident, all right, but not a hunting accident. He accidentally owned land your boss wanted. He walked into a trap set by a man that wanted his land. You sprung the trap with your

old Krag, Shay. Those old guns always were dangerous; yours is going to be the death of you."

Shay's eyes swept the room. "You all hear that?" he asked. "The man says he sneaked around my house and stole my gun."

Tudery's sense of fair play brought a word of caution to his lips, and Woodbine looked at him as he spoke. "Jim, he's twice your size," he said, and reached for the sawed-off shotgun. "Watch him!"

Woodbine had expected Shay's move, and his eyes had already turned back to the man. He saw Shay's muscles tighten as the man sprung towards him, as he had expected him to do. Woodbine's hand slid up to the neck of the whiskey bottle, he stepped back to brace himself and to escape Shay's clutching arms. He swung the bottle in a wide overhand arc and brought it down on Shay's head with all the power of his rawhide muscles. Shay's momentum would not let him dodge the blow, but he ducked. The bottle landed on the matted hair above his forehead, crashed into bits and the jagged end of the bottle's neck ploughed down across his forehead as far as the bridge of his nose, leaving red furrows like Indian tribal marks in the skin.

The blow jolted the breath out of Shay. He turned and clutched at the bar to steady himself while he shook his head dazedly to clear his brain.

Tudery returned his gun to the back bar. Somebody yelled, "Finish him quick!"

One of Woodbine's paid gun-hands got up and picked up a chair. Woodbine saw the movement out of the corner of his eye. "Keep out of this, everybody," he said, then backed away until he was jammed up against the old upright piano.

Men around the rear tables slid out of their seats and pushed the tables back against the wall, making room. Woodbine reached down and picked up the old round-top piano stool, gripping it by one of its ornate legs just above the brass claw holding a glass ball.

Shay was recovered from a blow that would have knocked the ordinary blacksmith unconscious. He was

approaching Woodbine again, slower this time, with a little of his steam gone, but still better than any man within a hundred miles. He had the strength and the resistance to hurt of a thousand-pound bull, and now he was a bull goaded to insensate fury.

Shay cursed as he came forward ignoring the threat of the piano stool. As Woodbine brought the stool around in a sweeping circle, the man pivoted quickly on his feet and ducked his head so that the blow caught him on the left shoulder and the muscles of his back. The revolving seat part of the stool flew out of its socket and rolled the length of the room.

Woodbine had to back away quickly, then he clutched the stool by two of its legs, raised it in the air and brought it down towards Shay's head. Shay side-stepped and raised his arm, and the stool caught his hand and knocked his arm down to his side with the snapping sound of broken small bones. Shay instinctively rubbed the cracked left fist with his right hand while the cords in his bullish neck tightened momentarily.

Woodbine raised the stool over his head the third time and brought it down, and the edge of it caught the side of Shay's face as the man shifted his head away, and landed on his shoulder. The blow was solid and it bent Shay's knees. Shay shuffled his big feet to keep his upright stance, and in this fraction of a second Woodbine was able to slide sideways from in front of the piano where he had been hemmed in.

Having more room now, he circled Shay, and Shay turned on his feet, continuing to face him. Woodbine took the stool in one hand and with sideways sweeps which landed back and forth he beat Shay back against the bar. Shay pushed his elbows behind him on to the bar and supported himself as Woodbine closed in on him.

When Woodbine was within reach, Shay, supporting his weight with his elbows, suddenly kicked Woodbine in the stomach, knocking him backward the width of the room. Woodbine fell under a table.

Shay yelled triumphantly and dashed across the room towards him. "Now I got you."

Woodbine quickly rolled sideways, overturning the table in the speed of his escape from the charging madman, and came to his feet behind another table. He picked up a cracker bowl off the table and threw it at Shay's face. The heavy missile glanced off Shay's skull and crashed into the back bar mirror, sending down a rain of broken glass.

Shay shook his head and batted his eyes. He put his hands down on the top of a table and supported his weight on them for a moment, saying something to himself. He wiped the blood off his face with his sleeve and pushed the bloody hair back out of his eyes, then he looked around and fastened his eyes on Woodbine with an animal glare. His lips were moving, and he licked the blood off them.

Then he caught the back of a chair with his two hands, lifted it into the air and hurled it at Woodbine, its legs making four spears flying towards his head. Woodbine sidestepped the chair, picked up a chair of his own and rounded the table between them. He raised his chair and brought it crashing down on Shay. Shay's unconscious reaction was to lift both hands over his head, hunch his shoulders and try to bury his head between them.

The chair thudded on his skull and came apart in Woodbine's hands. Shay staggered to the wall where he put his two hands against it and tried to get his legs straightened out under him. Woodbine followed him in with the remains of the chair.

Shay turned around facing Woodbine, the wall still supporting him, then pushed against it with his hands and flung his great hulk at Woodbine. Woodbine met the onrush with the remains of the chair in his hands. The weapon caught Shay in the mouth and chin. Shay wobbled on his feet and sank to the floor on his back.

Woodbine stepped away, and Shay started crawling. Any normal being would have been dead or at least unconscious, but this bull of a man, whose body was composed of such extraordinary animal bone and

muscle and such a lack of sensitivity to pain, was merely turned into a wounded and dangerous animal, dazed for a moment, but goaded into an atavistic urge to destroy the enemy torturing him.

Shay continued crawling blindly until he bumped into another table, and he caught on to it and dragged himself erect in front of it and stood blinking at Woodbine through bloodshot eyes. More blood from his head and forehead dribbled down and blinded him, and he dug into his eyes with the heels of his two hands, to clear his vision, mumbling through his pulpy lips.

He held his broken left hand up close to his face and tried to watch himself open and close the fingers. The fingers did not move very far, and the back of the hand was swelling.

Woodbine tossed the chair legs way from him and said, "Now, Shay, I've got you whittled down to my size. Now we're going to fight."

Somebody in the crowd said, "God Almighty!"

Shay dropped his crippled hand and stared at Woodbine through his dripping eyebrows. "Yeah, we're going to fight, now."

This man's body was a throwback to some prehistoric age when men were more nearly like animals. He had the brute instincts of a gorilla hardly feeling his pain in the killing fury that flooded through him. He came forward with his broken hand raised in guard and his big right fist cocked.

Woodbine stood his ground when the blow came, moving his head to the side so that the fist whished past his ear. He sank his own fist into the big man's stomach with a force that brought the breath whistling out Shay's bloody lips. Shay doubled over and before Woodbine could lift the man's head with an uppercut, Shay's head came up under Woodbine's chin with a cracking force that rattled his teeth. The blow threw Woodbine's head upward, and a second fast blow from Shay's fist caught him squarely in the chin.

There was still the power of a mule's kick in Shay's fist, and the pain of the blow flashed like lightning from Woodbine's jaw through his neck and down his back

and left him standing paralyzed and momentarily helpless.

Shay's animal instincts told him of this advantage and he stepped back to give himself room to swing. His right hand came around in a hook that caught Woodbine on the side of the head and spun him around. Woodbine fell against the old piano, his elbows bringing discordant notes from the keys. He lost his footing and slid to the floor.

Shay followed him and kicked him in the ribs as Woodbine rolled over. Woodbine caught desperately at the man's ankle and hugged it to him with Shay's foot off the floor. Shay started to fall, but caught himself on the keyboard of the piano and tried to kick Woodbine's hold loose so that he could stamp him to death.

Woodbine pulled himself up by Shay's own leg and somehow got erect, and when he did, Shay got his left arm hooked around Woodbine's neck and was trying to shove his head backward so he could pound his face into a pulp.

Caught as he was, Woodbine could not reach Shay's face with his fists, but used them with short piston strokes all landing under the point of Shay's ribs. As Woodbine's own breath became shorter from the stranglehold on his neck, his blows began to have their effect on the already panting Shay. Shay's breath changed to gasps, to jerky gulps, and then he could not get his breath at all.

Woodbine kept the two fists working on the same spot, and gradually Shay's armhold weakened and he staggered backward. Shay tried to turn away from Woodbine, his hands spread out in a groping fashion as he tried to escape from those sickening and never-ceasing thuds into his stomach.

When Shay was back far enough to give Woodbine arm room, Woodbine cocked his fist, raised himself on to the balls of his feet and drove a straight right hand with every ounce of strength he could muster. The blow caught Shay flush on the point of the chin and knocked him to the floor where he landed in a sitting position with his back to the bar.

The pain of the blow shot up Woodbine's arm to his shoulder, and spread clear across his back. He flexed his fist and it was numb.

"Get up, Moody," he said. "Let's get this over once for all! Get up and fight!"

Moody Shay did not move, but sat on the floor before the bar with his legs spread out straight in front of him, the swollen lips in his bloody face still mumbling unintelligible sounds, but he did not attempt to rise. His eyes stared into space.

Woodbine spat blood from his mouth and said, "Get up!"

Shay did not move.

"Get up, I said!" Woodbine's words snapped like a pistol shot.

The sound must have penetrated into Shay's brain, for he shuffled around and helped himself get to his feet with the aid of the edge of the bar counter. He looked into the remains of the back bar mirror and he saw his face bloody from forehead to chin. Blood seeped down from his freshly flattened nose over his swollen lips and down his neck into his dingy shirt. His eyes were swollen until he was hardly able to see through them. He rubbed his hands across his face with a gesture of disbelief, and the sight of himself must have decided his next action, for he turned and ran towards the front without a look at Woodbine.

In his stunned confusion, Shay did not move towards the door, but straight towards the big plate-glass window. He could not have seen the glass because he did not stop until he bumped into it. He rubbed his hands over it, as though blindly trying to identify it. Then in a kind of panic, he picked up a chair, crashed it through the glass and stepped out onto the sidewalk and started running.

There was a chorus of groans of relief from pent-up nervous tension in the room, and an awed voice exclaimed, "Good God Almighty!"

There wasn't any talk for a long moment, and then Tudery said, "We ought to catch him, Jim, if he killed Sterling."

"No. I'm not ready for that yet."

Tudery looked puzzled. "But if he killed Ab—"

"I need him to lead me to the man that hired him."

"I thought you said you knew who it was."

"I did. But I didn't say I could prove it."

Doc Tudery grinned. "Sure." Then, "All right, boys, line up and name it. It's on the house for the rest of the evening."

Woodbine said, "Lend me a wet bar towel, Doc. And make up a bill for the damage. I'll take care of it."

Tudery handed him a towel, and when Woodbine had wiped the blood off his face, Tudery said, "How about a drink, Jim?"

"I haven't got time," Woodbine answered. "And if Bob Burnham comes in, tell him I'll see him later."

He turned to the gun-hands who were lining up at the bar. "You fellows better turn in early tonight," he said. "We're going to start fencing in the morning."

Then he turned and left the saloon, went down to the livery stable and got his horse and rode out of town. As the tightness seeped from him the pains came. The muscles of his body regained their sensitivity and with it began the reaction to the terrible punishment they had undergone. His face was bruised, and began throbbing. There were places on his ribs that hurt at every jolt of the horse's bouncing, and it was a task to keep his arms from dropping at his sides.

He had taken an awful beating, and it would have been worse if he had depended on his bare fists from the beginning of the fight. He speculated on this; no matter how right he may have been, rightness would not have been an armor against Shay's superior animal strength or brutality.

This had not been a boxing match to establish the superiority of one man over another, but had been part of Woodbine's design to prove that Shay was a murderer and to drive a wedge between him and the man who had instigated the murder. And though it was not to his taste, Woodbine felt justified in using the means he had used to whip Shay into a mental condition in

which he would make some mistake which would clearly establish the guilt of the man behind him.

Even though Shay had finally run out on the fight, Woodbine was somewhat disappointed in the way it had ended, for he knew that Shay had not been completely whipped, had not as yet revealed anything damaging to himself or anybody else, and was still a dangerous man running loose. Woodbine could only hope that by planting the idea in Shay's mind that he knew who the other party was, he had sowed the seeds of discord between them.

It was late when he got home, and he did not wake Jess Hardracker up, but went to bed quickly. He had had a long day and a busy one. He had tried to get help, and found that he was going to get none, but he had also learned some things, and he had started a brew which he hoped would boil up into trouble for Noble Fry.

Now as he reviewed the day's happenings his mind went to Virginia Sterling, and here it stopped. What had happened between them? He pondered this for a long time, and went to sleep with the problem still on his mind, the problem of the man who had just as soon marry a wildcat, and the girl who had just as soon kiss a cactus.

THE POT BEGINS TO BOIL

WHEN Moody Shay escaped from Woodbine's punishment he set his horse in the direction of Noble Fry's ranch. He was a battered hulk of a man who had taken enough punishment to have killed two or three men of normal build, and now the reaction was setting in. His bodily pains were great, but transcending these were the things that festered in his mind and drove him on to further action despite the crying need of his body for rest and healment of his wounds. Humiliation, rage and fear boiled up in the man and poisoned such judgment as he had.

He had been whipped and driven out of town by a man smaller than himself, and this humiliation could never be wiped out except with the death of Woodbine. His rage at Noble Fry was even greater. He had done a job of murder for Fry, and he now interpreted Woodbine's statement before the fight to mean that Fry had sold him out. He had heard Woodbine reveal the facts of the murder to people in the town and, knowing the townsmen's regard for old Ab Sterling, and the summary justice they would even now be preparing for him, he was in terror of the hangman's noose.

These three passions drove Moody Shay to form his simple plans as he rode. He had to get money from Fry, then punish Fry for informing on him, then go into hiding from the posse he knew would be looking for him.

It was midnight when he reached Fry's ranch-house and shouted at its darkened walls. When Fry had

answered his call, and he had identified himself, Fry lighted a lamp and let him in the door.

In the littered living-room, Noble Fry stood in his pants and undershirt and looked at the beaten Shay, and saw instantly that there was something seriously wrong. He sat down at his desk, pushed a bottle of whiskey across to Shay, and said, "Well, what damned fool trick have you been up to now?"

Shay sat down across the desk, poured a tin cup half full of the liquor and downed it before answering.

"I've got to get out of here for a while, and I've got to have some money. I'd better take the whole thousand, because I might not be back for a while."

"What are you talking about?" Fry snapped. "Talk sense."

"This is sense. The lid's off. The whole town knows now that you hired me to kill Sterling. They'll have a posse after me any time, and I'm not sticking around to stretch a rope for them."

"You're a fool!" Fry snapped. "How could they know about that deal—unless you told them? Did you get drunk and spout off at the mouth? Who beat you up?"

Moody Shay picked up the bottle and drank directly from it. "Look here, I ain't got no time to sit and beat around the bush with you. Everybody in town knows about it now. Woodbine went to my place and stole my gun, and he had the bullet they found in Ab. He's done turned it all over to a committee. Him and me had a little set-to, and I come off without being able to get my gun back. Now I want the money for that job so I can get out of the country for a while."

Noble Fry tapped his tin cup on his desk impatiently while he reviewed this bad news. After a pause he said, "You're just upset now. Thinking you killed Ab and proving it are two different things. After all, nobody saw you do it, so it's just your word against his."

"Don't tell me that," Shay answered angrily. "It ain't over six hours since you told me my word against them kind of people wasn't worth a damn. Now you're saying just the opposite. I ain't staying to find out which

is right. I'm pulling out, and I want my money—right now, this minute."

"Well, now," Noble Fry stalled, "remember, that wasn't the deal. I told you I'd pay you after I got hold of all that river-bottom land. That's a little ways off yet, and in the meantime I haven't got enough cash to pay you off right now."

Shay's swollen face went black. "You don't think you're gonna get out of paying me, do you?" he asked sharply.

Fry raised a conciliatory hand. "Of course not. Take it easy. I'm going to pay you."

"You're going to pay me *now!* You're paying those gun-hands in cash, and you're going to pay me, too."

"I just can't do that now, Shay. I simply haven't got the cash to keep those men here long enough to finish the job, and give you a thousand as well. But I'll give it to you as soon as I get this deal in the bag. You know I wouldn't try to cheat a friend."

"Sure," Shay answered. "You'd pay somebody to shoot a friend in the back, but you wouldn't cheat the man that did the job for you. It's great to be a honest and respectable man, ain't it, Fry?"

"You're just upset. Let's take another angle for a minute. How did Woodbine say he knew I was the one that engineered that killing?"

There was little of Moody Shay's eyes showing now under their swelling, but they took on a sudden canny look, when he saw that Noble Fry was worried about his own safety.

"You've been able to figger all the angles," he countered. "You figger that one."

"That's no attitude to take," Fry persisted. "Like you say, we're both in this together. If I'm going to have to figure a way to clear us both, I've got to know what we've got to buck up against. What did Woodbine say?"

"How about my money?" Shay countered. "Then we'll go into that." He had Fry over a barrel now, and he intended to keep him there.

"About Woodbine," Fry said. "He knows too much.

We can't afford to have him around where he can talk out of turn, can we? You owe him for that licking he gave you—"

"Who said he gave me a licking? He's just as bunged up as I am."

"If he's still alive, I doubt it," Fry said. "But it looks like you'd better plan to see that he doesn't do any more talking."

"So you want me to do another job without paying me for the first one, huh? How about my money, Fry?"

Fry shook his head. "You can't scare me, Moody. I told you when I'd pay you, and that's when I'm going to do it. Now get on out of here before they come here looking for you."

Moody Shay picked up the whiskey bottle by the neck, put his other hand on the desk and raised the bottle over his head.

"Don't be foolish," Fry said. He had lifted a gun out of the drawer of his desk, and the muzzle of it was pointed at Moody Shay's face. "You know I could kill you and turn you over to that posse you say is being formed, and they'd thank me for it."

Moody Shay let the bottle waver, then took it in his other hand and drank from it and set it on the table. Some of the self-confidence that Woodbine had beat out of him was gone for all time. Moody Shay would never be the same man again.

"That's more like it," Fry purred. "Now tell me, what does Woodbine know for sure about me?"

"I don't know," Shay admitted, "but he knows all right."

"That's not much help." Fry toyed with the cylinder of his pistol thoughtfully. "Try to use your brains now, Moody. We've got to work together, not against each other. You know—I just thought of something—Woodbine might be just guessing. How could he prove what he said?"

"I ain't waiting to find out," Shay said. "I'm going to clear out for a while. Anyway, till my face gets all healed up and I can come back and get a crack at Wood-

bine. I'll get him if it's the last thing I do. If you had just a little money—I'm flat broke, and I've got to live till things clear up."

"That's more like it," Fry smiled. "I can give you a couple of hundred on account. You take a little trip till things cool down, then slip back and we'll figure out things. All right?"

"Maybe that's better," Moody admitted. He picked up the bottle and poured some more of the liquor into his cup.

Fry spun his swivel chair around facing the small iron safe in the corner, and spun the dial back and forth, then swung the iron door open and unlocked a smaller iron door to a pigeon-hole in the safe's interior.

Moody Shay stood up, gripped the whiskey bottle tightly by the neck and brought it down on the back of Noble Fry's head. Fry slid out of his seat and lay between the desk and the safe with blood running out of his scalp.

Shay stepped around the desk and found a package of currency in the pigeon-hole, rifled through it and stuffed it into his pocket. Not having stopped to get his pistol when he left the Rattlesnake Bar through the plate-glass window, he picked up Fry's weapon, examined the cylinder, and stuffed it into his waistband.

He stood over Fry, looking down at him through his puffed eyes, and said, "I'd ought to pound your head to a pulp, but I reckon it'd be better if you was to live a little longer. Maybe them good people of Ashfork will be satisfied to see your neck in a noose, seein's they won't get a chance at mine."

He kicked the still form of Fry in the ribs, took another drink from the bottle, and went out and got on his horse.

It was some time later when Moody Shay pulled up into the clearing of Hugh Ambler's house and shouted until Ambler showed up at the door with his pants and gun on, and no light in the house behind him.

"What do you want this time of night?" Ambler asked irritably.

Shay slid off his horse and said, "Sit down. I had to see you in a hurry."

They both sat on the trunk of a felled oak, and Ambler waited. Shay turned his story over in his mind, checking on it, then laid it before the taciturn man.

"I just had a little go-round with Woodbine over in town, and I've got to make tracks for a while. I'm going to need a little money to carry me on, and seein's I done quite a bit of work for you, it ought to be I could get some from you. Say about a thousand dollars."

Ambler slid off the log, walked a couple of paces, kicking the ground with his boot toe and turning this over in his mind. He took his time about it, and then asked:

"How come you have to duck out just on account of a little scrap? Did you kill him?"

"No, but he happened to run into something that might not do me no good if he told it around."

"Meaning he found the body, or something?"

"What body? I ain't killed nobody."

Ambler said, "You're not talking to these fools around here when you're talking to me, Shay. Did Woodbine discover that you'd shot Ab Sterling?"

"Me? Shot Ab Sterling? You're crazy!"

"But that's what Woodbine discovered, ain't it?"

"Well," Shay admitted. "He figgered he had evidence I did, but I didn't do it. Still, there's people that might believe I did."

"Like me, for instance," Hugh Ambler said softly.

"You mean you'd take Woodbine's word for a charge like that?"

"No," Ambler said, "but it just happens I saw you kill him."

"When?"

"I get around, Shay. I just happened to be interested in what Fry and Woodbine and Sterling were doing up there at the head of the creek that day, so I kind of kept 'em in sight. I'm not criticizing you, understand, for killing Sterling. I was just mentioning it so we'd understand each other. Now what was on your mind?"

Moody Shay told himself that he ought to pull his

gun and kill Ambler, but there were three things that held him back. He wanted money from Ambler, Ambler had a gun and might be able to draw quicker, and then, something of his old disregard for danger had gone out of him. He felt this new fear, and was angry with himself for recognizing it, but none the less he had to face the fact that it had come to him. He could not quite risk facing Ambler's gun, and knowing this fear, he had to relinquish the mastery of the situation to Hugh Ambler.

"All right, you know what you know, then," he admitted grudgingly. "So I've got to fade out for a while, and I've got to have money to do it. I've helped you drive enough sleeping beef off this range to have a thousand dollars' worth of help coming from you."

Hugh Ambler said, "So you decided that you'd blackmail me out of a thousand dollars before you pulled your stakes. Why didn't you get it from Fry?"

"He don't owe me nothing."

"Hold him up, like you're trying to do me. After all, you shot Sterling for him, didn't you?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Look, my friend, you're just like everybody else on this range. You don't think I've got either eyes or brains in my head. You could take a stick and draw a map of this range on the ground, and you could know the men around here, and with those facts you can tell just what each one of them can be expected to do. I know as much about what Noble Fry is trying to do as he does."

"Then why don't you beat him to it?" Moody Shay asked. It was dawning on him that he had not given this Ambler man credit for nearly as much sense as he should have.

Ambler chuckled. "There's an easier way for a smart man to handle it. Let him go on and furnish the fireworks. He'll do the dirty work, and get the blame. Then when he's finished, I'll come along and take over. Simple, ain't it, Moody?"

There was a touch of boastfulness in Ambler's voice,

and also a hint of cordiality which pleased Shay, in the light of his new respect for Ambler's brains.

"You got something there," Shay admitted.

"Now about that money," Ambler said. "I haven't got but a few dollars cash on me, but I've got an idea of how I can help you. That is, if you've got sense enough to recognize a good thing when you see it. I'm going to be top man around here after Fry makes his little play, and I'd have something good for a man with your guts and savvy."

Shay thought this over a moment. If he hadn't killed Fry with that blow to the head, this would be a good way to deal him some more misery, and since he still believed that Fry had sold him out for the purpose of evading payment for his killing job, this appealed to him. He wished he'd realized before that it was Ambler who was going to be the big buck around here.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked Ambler.

"I've got about forty head of short yearlings up in that box canyon, that I want driven over to Deerlick. You've handled as many as twenty-five at a time; do you think you could push forty over the mountains by yourself? The drive would keep you out of sight while your face healed up, and you could hide out at the Deerlick place till I sent you word that the coast was clear around here. Then you could come back and help me cash in on Fry's work. In the meantime, if Ashfork felt like hanging somebody, they'd take it out on Fry maybe, and save us taking care of him. Anyway, we could clean up anybody that was left that was dangerous to you, and Fry would get the blame for that. How does it sound to you?"

Moody Shay turned this over in his mind for a long moment, and in it he saw the safety he craved, the revenge he wanted visited on Fry, and future prosperity in his line-up with a smarter man than Noble Fry.

"Sure," he said. "It's a deal. But I'd like to get going as quick as I could. I'd like to be on the other side of these mountains by daylight."

"Wait till I saddle up," Ambler said, "and I'll help

you get the stuff strung out on the trail. You're a smart man, Moody, and I can make it worth your while to tie up with me."

"I always did figger you for a smart man, yourself," Moody answered. "The kind I like to do business with." He got to his feet, then said, "By the way, I reckon I'd better have a fresh horse."

"Can do," Ambler answered, and started for his horse. With his face hidden from Shay, he permitted himself a smile as he thought, "Imagine that damned fool coming and throwing me a hole card like that, right in my lap, too. Well, I'll keep him under cover till I have to use him to knock Mister Fry off the limb, then I'm going to have to close his mouth quick. His loose mouth is too dangerous."

MOODY SHAY pushed the stolen forty head of mixed whitefaces and polled shorthorns up the brushy trail that led over the gap in Ashfork Ridge. In the darkness and because of the thickness of the brush alongside the trail, the young stock was easy to control, and it did not matter much to him if a few of them got away.

Despite the soreness of his body, Shay's mood had improved after he and Ambler had got the herd lined out, for ideas were coming to him.

He had a thick packet of money in his pocket, how much he didn't know, for he had not had the chance to count it. And he had forty head of stock that would bring a good price in Deerlick. This stock would never see Ambler's feeder ranch, but would go directly to the pens at the commission house, and Moody would pocket a nice addition to his already thick roll. He had to laugh at Ambler, who thought he was a smart man. He had just agreed to everything Ambler had said, and had flattered him a little, and Ambler had handed him a nice herd which would help him on his way to some part of the country where there was not anybody looking for him with a rope. Fry and Ambler! They considered themselves smart men! Moody Shay laughed until his cracked lips hurt him.

It was getting light when he made the cut at the top of the ridge where the trail began its downward thrust towards Deerlick. He stopped his horse to blow him, and to survey the hillside sloping down towards Deer-

lick and freedom. And it was while he was stopped that he heard the voice.

"All right, Shay, just hold everything."

Moody Shay froze in his saddle, then tightened his muscles preparatory to spurring the horse forward as he looked for the owner of the voice. Then he settled his weight back into the seat of the saddle, and the blood in his veins ran cold with an onslaught of his newfound fear.

The voice was the voice of Noble Fry, but Fry was hidden from him, and he did not know which way to turn to run him down or to escape from him. And in his uncertainty, he did nothing, while the calves he was driving meandered downward on the trail towards Deerlick.

It was still a darkish grey dawn, and in the bad light Shay could not see the man he now wished he had finished killing.

"What do you want, Fry?" His eyes were still searching frantically for the man.

"I want you to put your hands on your saddle horn and keep them there while we have a little talk, Moody. Put 'em on there!"

Moody Shay cupped his two hands on his saddle horn, and then he heard the brush rustle and Noble Fry stepped out into the path about ten feet ahead of him. Fry had him covered with a rifle. Fry was bare-headed, and the hair on the side of his head was matted with dried blood.

"Just a little talk, Moody. Just a little information I want."

Moody gulped and said, "Listen, Fry, I told you I had to get out of the country, and you wouldn't believe me. I had to have the money and you wouldn't give it to me. You'd have done the same thing if you'd been in my fix, now wouldn't you? Besides, I didn't hit you any harder than I had to. You won't hold that against me, will you?"

"That depends, Moody, that depends. Like I said, I wanted to have a little talk with you before you left the country."

"How'd you find me?"

"That wasn't hard. I just figured you wouldn't go to your own place, but that you'd probably want to get patched up and get a fresh horse. Ambler was about the only man in the direction of the mountains that you might get one from, so I ambled over to Ambler's just to ask him if he'd seen you. Imagine my surprise, Moody, when I bumped into you and him riding together out towards that box canyon. I didn't know you two was friends, so I followed. And surprise on surprise, you and him broke this little herd out and started them up this way. I'd never thought about Ambler as a thief, so I thought I'd just trail along till you got out of earshot—"

"You mean gunshot—"

"Call it gunshot. Anyway, tell me something, Moody. How long has this been going on?"

"I don't know a thing about Ambler," Moody said. "I said I was going over the mountain, and he offered to pay me to drive these calves to his other place. You don't mean they're stolen."

"Poor Moody, you'll never grow up, will you? I'm afraid I'm going to have to look on that whack you gave me on the head as right unfriendly. I want to know how long you and Ambler have been rustling sleepers off this creek bottom. And don't tell me you don't know that mixed herd is sleepers. You and I both recognize the blood lines of my stuff, and Churchill's and Sterling's and Woodbine's. Moody, do you want to sell some information in exchange for your own worthless life?"

"I don't know a thing, Fry. Honest!"

"Honest!" Fry mocked. He was in a rising humor now with Shay under the muzzle of his gun. "Honest, I'm sorry to have to kill you, but after all, if you don't know anything, there's not much reason for waiting."

"Look," Moody said, sweat breaking out on his forehead and running salty down the lacerations on his face. "Look, Fry, don't hold it against me. I'll tell you about Ambler. Sure, he's been picking up sleepers, and I've picked up a few that I've bumped into and

sold 'em to him. I drove maybe six little bunches down to his other place."

"What other place?"

"He's got a feeder lot at Deerlick, under the name of the Deerlick Cattle Company. People there think he's a big rancher up here, and cattle buyer, so they're not surprised when odd brands show up on his lot, vented, of course, and with sales papers. I'm going to hide out down there till this blows over. Then I was intending to come back and get in touch with you."

"That's nice, Moody, mighty nice. But I can't afford to have you running loose around the country. Your tongue starts wagging as soon as you get scared, and it seems that you get scared pretty easy now since Woodbine worked you over. No, Moody, you ain't going to Deerlick."

"Look here," Moody said with a trace of hysteria in his voice. "Don't do it, Noble. I done your killing for you. I'll do more. I'll leave this stock here and go back and finish off Woodbine for you. I'll take care of anybody you don't like, only don't do nothing you'll be sorry for."

"Sorry, Moody, but you're not safe. Back there I thought I was going to torture you just as you like to torture people, but it's not worth it. I don't like it. It's just a job that has to be done."

He pulled the trigger of his rifle and a spot on Moody Shay's shirt front danced slightly and a puff of dust blossomed from it. Moody made some kind of sound with his voice and wobbled in the saddle. He clutched the horn tighter with his two hands, but they slid loose and he fell sideways to the ground as his horse bolted.

As Moody Shay lay writhing on the ground, Fry leaned his rifle against a tree and went to him. Squatting beside the wounded man, he asked, "Where's that money you stole from me?"

Shay did not answer him, and Fry turned the man over on his back. He was in the act of putting his hand into Shay's pocket when he heard the unmistakable sounds of galloping horses.

He stepped back from Shay quickly, his mind flooded with a swift panic at the sounds. Shay was still alive, and he might live to tell his story. Fry measured the distance back to his rifle against the sound of approaching hoofs, then as he looked at Shay speculatively, he saw his own stolen pistol in Shay's belt.

He took the pistol and shot Moody Shay through the head with it, then stepped back just as the first horsemen in the group came into sight up the trail. They were Burnham and Woodbine, and behind them Fry saw Race Greer and several other townsmen. He stood and waited their approach, framing his story swiftly.

As Woodbine and Burnham dismounted, Fry's mind raced over the details of the story he would tell. He could not claim the money now, for he feared that ownership of it might tie him in with Ambler and the stolen cattle.

Merle Roberson, knowing the strained relations between the other two ranchmen and Fry, acted as spokesman. "What happened, Noble?"

"I finally caught up with Moody," Fry said. "I'd been suspecting him of dipping into my herd for quite a while, and so I'd had him working for me so I could keep an eye on him. He came by the place tonight, changed horses, and left out. I followed him, saw him pick up a little herd of calves at his corral, that he'd evidently been collecting one at a time, and head this way. I circled him and waited for him here, so I could catch him with the goods. Well, we had some words, and then a little shooting, and there he is. I've done the neighborhood a favor, I'd say."

Merle Roberson chose his words carefully. "I guess you've saved us a nasty job."

"You wanted him?" Fry asked with a show of surprise on his face. "What for?"

"We just wanted to talk to him about killing Ab Sterling. Looks like he did it."

Fry clucked. "The dirty skunk. Well, that settles him."

"Now that you've killed him, what are you going to do with him?" Roberson asked.

"Far as I'm concerned, he can lie right there. Damned if I'm going to do any work burying him after him stealing from me."

Woodbine was sitting on his booteheels over the body of Shay. "We'll take him on down to where we can get some tools and bury him," he said without looking at Fry. "I'd kind of like to look over the stuff he was driving over the ridge."

Fry stuck the pistol in his belt and went over and got his rifle. "I'll be going on, if you boys are taking over."

Roberson nodded, and went over and looked at Shay's body, while Noble Fry went into the woods, got his horse and rode back down the hill.

Woodbine was examining the wound in Shay's head and the one in the chest. He looked at Bob significantly a long moment, then got to his feet. "We might as well see what else is around. I wonder where his horse is?"

They found the horse which had run a hundred feet or so and stopped to graze. Woodbine came up to the animal, patted his nose and caught him up. He turned to old Bob who had followed him. "Ever see that horse before?"

"Not Moody's," Bob answered.

"No. That's Moody's saddle, but the horse belongs to Hugh Ambler. It's not Ambler's regular saddle horse, but he's brought it along to round-ups."

"Sure, I remember now," Bob said, and examined the horse again. "Moody could have stolen it."

"Ask somebody to look for the stock he was driving."

Race Greer and a couple of other men went down the trail on the far side of the gap and came back after a while with a string of about thirty yearlings and calves, and they all examined them.

"About every brand along the creek on them," Woodbine said, "and a few from brands away from the bottom. All vented to a D in a C. Wonder whose brand that is?"

"We'll drive them down to my place and hold them till we can get them all back to their owners," Wood-

bine suggested. "We'd better get Moody loaded on to his horse."

Woodbine, on a sudden impulse, squatted and went through Moody's pockets. He brought out the big roll of bills that Moody had taken from Fry's safe. Bob whistled, and Merle Roberson reached out and took the money and examined it. "Two thousand dollars," he said after he had counted the money. "I'll put it in my safe for the time."

They got Moody's body tied on to his horse, and got the young cattle strung out and headed back down the mountainside. Woodbine, Bob Burnham and Merle brought up the rear.

"What do you think all this means?" Merle asked.

"It's just scrambled things up fine," Woodbine said. "I never saw one thing tangle up things in general so much as this does."

"Why?" Bob asked. "It gets one man out of the picture."

"And brings another one in," Woodbine answered. "It leaves new questions scattered all over the mountain."

"Yeah," Bob admitted. "Like, why should Moody have suddenly got hold of one of Ambler's horses, unless he stole it. And where did he get that roll of money?"

"I can answer that one," Merle Roberson said. "It's still got the blue band on it that the bank put on it. I had that money in my safe, and I cashed a check for Fry with it. Fry's safe being open, Moody could have stolen it from him."

"In that case, why didn't Fry mention that Moody had robbed him? He might have not wanted to claim that money for some reason."

"It may have been because he murdered Moody to keep his mouth shut. Moody was shot twice, but once with the rifle and once with that pistol Fry had in his hand. The two bullet holes are not the same size. And if you remember, there was a space of time between those two shots. In my book that reads that Fry shot Moody and wounded him, maybe to get his money

back, and then when he heard our horses he shot him again to be sure he was dead enough not to contradict any story Fry told. I told Shay that I know who hired him to kill Ab, figuring he'd make a bee-line to whoever it was, either to tip him off or to jump him for revealing the killing. It looks like Shay might have done just that. The money ties 'em up together, all right, but it still don't prove that Fry hired Shay to kill Ab."

"And the horse ties Moody to Ambler," Roberson speculated, "but it doesn't tie Ambler to Fry, and we still don't know for sure that it was Moody who actually stole those calves. This thing gets worse every time you discover something new."

"It does show us that all is not sweetness and light on this range," Woodbine said dryly. "I started out to do a simple job of fencing a piece of land. I haven't even got started fencing yet, and the further along I get the more it looks like I'm going to have to fence out more than cattle before we have any peace."

They reached a fork in the trail, and Woodbine pulled his horse up short. "Look," he said, pointing to the trail that turned to the right. "Those calves came from that way. That trail leads to the ford across the creek and on to Ambler's place. They didn't come from around Moody's, as Fry claimed they did."

The other two men pulled up with him, verified the fact of the hoofprints, and made their comments.

"I'm going to see where that stock has been kept hid," Woodbine said. "You all take Moody's body down to my house and get Doc Ellis to check on those two wounds and save the bullets if he finds them in the body. Throw the stock into my lower corral. I'll be along as soon as I see where this trail leads."

WOODBINE had no difficulty back-tracking the herd of calves, and by nine o'clock he had crossed the creek and followed the trail to the corral in a wooded section on Ambler's land where the calves had been held while their original brands had been vented and the new ones healed. Now the corral gate was open and the corral empty, and thus there was nothing to tie Ambler to the stolen cattle except the tracks leading from this hiding place.

Woodbine was satisfied enough now that Ambler had been in the rustling with Moody Shay, and that Noble Fry, who could have got this information out of Shay before shooting him, had grabbed on to it and told it in order to divert any suspicion from himself. Ordinarily such information would have been a satisfactory excuse for Fry shooting Shay. But to Woodbine, it didn't add up to the complete answer, because of Fry's having failed to mention his missing money. It suddenly came to Woodbine that the reason for this might have been that this was money that Shay got from Fry either as payment for killing Ab, or as an extortion to keep it secret.

Woodbine went over the whole confused set of facts again, saw that his conjectures made sense, but that they were only conjectures, and were not sufficient evidence to confront Fry with.

And while he was sitting his horse before the empty corral, trying to piece things together, Hugh Ambler rode up.

Ambler pulled up before him, and in his taciturn way, he waited for Woodbine to speak. Woodbine said, "Howdy. I was just riding around looking for strays."

"You thought maybe I might be holding some of your stuff in my corral?" Ambler asked.

"You're asking that question kind of bluntly, aren't you? What's the matter? Nervous about something?"

Ambler's smile was cold. "Why should I be nervous about anything? I'm always interested in people riding around over my ground. I've got stock running on it."

"I see," Woodbine answered. "Nice holding pen you've got here."

"Do you think of any particular reason why I shouldn't have a holding pen?"

"Why, no," Woodbine admitted.

"Well, was there anything else that you wanted on my land?"

"Yeah. Didn't happen to have seen Moody Shay lately, did you?"

"No, and I'm not likely to. I don't care much for the color of his shirt."

"I thought he was a friend of yours."

"Not me. Why do you say that?"

"You missing any stock lately?" Woodbine countered.

"Not that I know of. Why? You think he's been using a long loop?"

"Somebody has, Ambler. I just happened to pick up some stock with a road brand on it. Some of it was mine, some belonging to various neighbors. But none of yours, Ambler. Only the saddlehorse Moody was riding while he was driving the stuff. Drop down to my house some time and pick it up."

Woodbine turned his horse and started to ride away. Ambler called after him.

"Wait a minute. You say you caught Moody?"

"You don't think we'd let him ride on with it, do you?"

"You don't say," Ambler said with a show of surprise. He tapped his saddle horn with his fist specu-

latively. Then, "What did he have to say for himself? Tried to lie out of it, I bet."

"Well," Woodbine said slowly, watching Ambler's face, "you know how Moody is. Pretty rough customer until he gets scared, then his jaws work on ball bearings. Drop down and pick up your horse some time, Ambler."

Woodbine turned his back to the man and rode down the trail. Ambler sat gazing at him, mouth turned down at the corners, until the woods swallowed him up. Then Ambler's fist pounded down hard on the saddle horn.

"God damn that big loose-mouthed ox," he swore. "I should have closed those jaws of his for keeps last night. What could he have told them?"

Woodbine rode out of Ambler's and along the creek trail to Enos Churchill's place, where he found the old man out at a corral watching a couple of his hands breaking a colt to ride. Woodbine told him about his visit to Ambler the night before, about the fight with Shay, and about the things that had happened this morning, including his back-tracking the calves to Ambler's place and his talk with Ambler.

The old man sat down on a stump and thought this over for a long moment, and his shoulders seemed to sag. "So Ambler's a thief," he said wearily. "Well, I'm not surprised. I never did like the look of his eyes. He's too brazen in the face."

"It's not hanging proof against him," Woodbine admitted. "But it ties in. Some of the stuff is yours. I'm holding it down at my place till it's over. I thought you'd like to know."

The old man was silent again, and then he said, "I'm an old man, and I'd hoped to live the rest of my days in peace, but it don't seem like I'm going to get the chance to. If you need me, Jim, call on me."

"I don't know of anything you can do right now, thanks. We're trying to clear it up." Then after a thoughtful moment he repeated, "I thought you'd want to know."

"Yeah," the old man said absently. "Amy has been

seeing him. I didn't want her to, but she did, anyway. I know she did. Poor kid, she hasn't got any mother, and she's lonesome. I'll have to tell her."

"If you don't mind," Woodbine said, "it might be just as well if you didn't say anything about this to her at present. Until it's proved one way or another it wouldn't help us for him to know we were too interested in him. I want to find out about his Deerlick activities. That might tell us more about him."

The old man got to his feet with all the signs of age, and moved towards the house. "She just can't see him any more," he repeated. "I can't have my daughter seeing a man like that."

Woodbine mounted and rode out towards his own place.

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After Woodbine left him at the hidden corral, Hugh Ambler sat his horse a long time, one leg hooked over his saddle horn and his mind revolving about the thing he had heard. Knowing that Moody Shay was inclined to talk too much, he accepted Woodbine's statement about Moody Shay's weakness at face value and assumed that, upon his capture, Moody had told Woodbine of their deal. But thinking back over the conversation, he saw that he had failed to get very much information out of Woodbine. Woodbine hadn't said what had led him to capture Moody, nor who else was in the party with him, nor what they had done with Moody after catching him.

Ambler considered himself to be a careful and farsighted man, and he did not lay this lapse to carelessness, but to the fact that the news had surprised him so much that while he was trying to adjust himself to it, Woodbine had turned and left him. Not knowing whether Moody was alive to stand witness against him or not was bad business; it was a threat to his safety. It was imperative that he manage to close Moody's mouth as soon as he could safely do it.

Thinking further on the conversation, it suddenly

dawned on him that Woodbine had caught him in an outright lie when he had claimed that he had not missed any of his stock. People would know that he would have known it if his saddle horse had been taken from his barn lot, and the lie would go against him. He could not claim that he had innocently lent the horse to Moody, for he had already said that he had not seen the man and did not like him. His instinct and his knowledge of the fact that Woodbine and Fry, for whom Moody had been working, were at each other's throats, warned him that there was more to this than appeared on the surface, and he was not a man to see a storm cloud rise without preparing for it.

He looked at his watch, then turned his horse and rode about two miles to a small clearing in a clump of pines a little distance from the creek bank, and here he found Amy Churchill, as he had met her one morning some months ago, and afterward by appointment or common expectation of the meeting, many mornings and afternoons since.

She had a habit of riding here with her twenty-two rifle and leaving her horse in the clearing while she hunted squirrels in the pecan and hickory trees, and then coming back here to rest. Ambler found her sitting on a log with her morning's bag of three squirrels lying on the ground and the rifle leaning against the log.

He dismounted and sat down beside her, fashioned a cigarette for himself and smoked it through before either spoke. Then she said:

"You act as though the mountain had fallen on you, Hugh. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing. Sorry. I was just thinking, I guess. I've been thinking a lot lately."

"So have I," the girl smiled. "But thinking doesn't get you anywhere. It's bad for the digestion."

Ambler did not acknowledge the attempted humor of her statement, but lapsed into his silence again.

"Well, say something," she urged. "Get it off your mind."

"There's trouble coming to this range," he said, "and it makes me sad. I don't like to see it."

"It might not amount to anything," she answered.

"But it will! Woodbine has come to me twice to get my help, but I've had to turn him down. I don't like bloodshed."

"You're like my father, Hugh. He turned him down, too."

"Did he?" Ambler asked without apparent interest. "I guess that leaves Woodbine just about out on a limb by himself, and Fry ready to saw the limb off behind him. It's not right."

"I feel sorry for him, too."

"You think a lot of Woodbine, don't you, Amy?"

He eyed her shrewdly, and she met and weighed the meaning of his gaze.

"Oh," she said with a hint of coyness, "he likes me pretty well. He's not bad."

Ambler recalled Woodbine's warning about the girl, and he turned this over in his mind and weighed it, and he did not like the result.

"There will be war," he said, "and men are going to die. Nobody can remain on the sidelines. Fry has a lot of gun-hands, and for all I know, Woodbine may have some of his own, or intend to get them. They will kill each other off until there won't be much left of either one of them. Then somebody will step in and take over the land they fought about."

"Is that what you want to do, Hugh?"

"Somebody will take it. Your father doesn't want to expand, and that girl across the creek from me couldn't take it and hold it, and the little fellows farther away couldn't do much about it. I need more land. Why shouldn't I take it?"

The girl studied the man before her and saw new things in him, for there was a burning and eager glow in his eyes as he pictured this thing to her.

"Why are you telling me these things?" she asked.

"You have told me how lonely and bored you were, how dull it was for you. Well, I've got a way for you to see life, to be mixed up in it, part of it. Life is always a fight, a battle in which the strong man wins. I'm going to join in this fight at the right time, and I want

you by my side. Amy, I've been slow to mention this, but I would like you to marry me. Now, tonight. You must have known for some time how I feel about you."

The proposal came as somewhat of a shock to the girl. Hugh Ambler had made himself attractive to her, and she was not without knowledge that his kisses had been able to thrill her, for he had kissed her frequently of late. She had pictured him taking her in his arms in the moonlight and whispering his proposal between his kisses. Instead, it had come like some business offer in a cattle deal, and she saw instantly that it had come this suddenly not out of his love for her, but directly as a result of the trouble brewing on the range. Hugh Ambler, she saw, was carefully laying his plans to profit by the bloodshed he expected, and he wanted to recruit the strength of her father's house to his side. His proposal of marriage was merely a means to this end. She was furious with him, but she tried to keep her anger hidden from him.

She got to her feet, and her lips trembled. "Thank you for the offer, Hugh, but I will have to talk it over with my father."

Hugh got to his feet, and tried to take her into his arms, but she put her two hands against his chest and pushed him away. He held her tightly. "You're angry," he said. "I know what you think, but don't judge me yet. Let me finish what I intended to say. I know that your father doesn't particularly like me. That is why I suggested our eloping and being married tonight. I know that once he gets to know me, he'll change his opinion of me. And it will give me a chance to stand by his side and fight to protect him if the trouble spreads."

She struggled out of his arms. "And it will give you the moral backing of his good name, and it will give you hope that you can use him to help you loot your neighbors when they're whipped enough for you to step in." The reins with which she had tried to hold in her anger were slipping from her grasp.

Hugh Ambler smiled at her and shook his head sadly. "Amy, you're excited. I'm not so poor that I'm

picking dead bones, as you seem to think. I was expecting to buy from the side that lost and might want to move out of the country. I haven't told you this, because I wanted to think that you loved me for myself alone, but the fact is that I'm not a poor man on a little shirt-tail ranch. I've got other property, a big place down at Deerlick. I bought it up here as part of a program of expansion, if I liked the country. You want to get out of the loneliness you suffer here. Marry me and we will go and live at Deerlick. There you will find people, dances, society and the things you long for. How about it, Amy? We will have lots of land; we will be big people, important people."

"And my father being old, you will have three ranches, anyway, even if you don't profit by Jim Woodbine's trouble. It would be beautiful to you, wouldn't it? I'm sorry, I'm afraid you and I never did understand each other, Hugh."

She turned and picked up her rifle and caught up her grazing horse. Hugh Ambler saw that she had read his scheming through his words, and that he had misjudged this restless and unhappy girl. He knew now that he had failed in his plan to marry Enos Churchill's twenty sections of land. And he knew still further that he would be unable to force Enos Churchill to stand behind him as he had planned, if trouble struck him. These things were not his fault, he was convinced, but were just an unfortunate turn of the cards at a bad time. Such a bad break could be remedied by a man as smart as himself.

He watched the girl mount and turn her animal without looking back at him. He picked up the three dead fox squirrels and called after her. "You left your game, Amy."

"Take it," she flung back over her shoulder. "You can probably find some way to use it." Then the woods swallowed her up.

Hugh Ambler returned to his own horse and headed it for his home, where he knew he would have to busy himself with a new set of plans. Things were moving

fast here now, and he had no intention of being left out of the race.

The girl rode in her own direction with her thoughts turned upon herself, and they were not lovely thoughts. She was afraid that she was becoming bitter, for she knew that she was lonely, and she was genuinely afraid for herself. Her mistake in her judgment of Ambler was a warning to her that her loneliness could easily lead her into an infatuation for the wrong man.

She had liked Hugh Ambler, who had come out of a world which she, who hardly had seen anything of the world across the Ashfork Mountains, had longed for. He had told her of all the fun and the excitement and the people, and he had built her longings up almost to the bursting point.

He had made love to her, and she had enjoyed the experience so new to her, and she had convinced herself that she was almost in love with the man. She knew that within the last few years she had grown into a beautiful woman, and she had been unable to resist trying her wings in the presence of the only man who had spoken words of love to her.

And yet with it all, she had not entirely given her love to this man who was surely ten years older than herself. Jim Woodbine stood between her and that last step. She had seen Woodbine much in her life, for he was a neighbor with only the creek separating their two ranches, and she had long carried a childish love for him. When she was six years old she had resolved to marry him, but he had never suspected it. And now that she had become a woman, she was convinced that Jim Woodbine still thought of her as a child. She had tried to remedy this, and only last night she had felt that she had made him see that she was now grown and attractive. Jim Woodbine had seen her in this new light, and he had almost taken her in his arms.

She rode through the trees with her horse at a walk, and she sorted her thoughts and found that things were not so bad. She had discovered her mistake in judgment about Ambler, and she had shown Jim Woodbine

that she was an attractive woman. This gave her mind direction, for now she was free to give her attention to Woodbine and set about accomplishing the thing she had decided upon a dozen years ago.

. And thus she rode up to the barnlot with a lighter heart than she had known for some time. She turned the reins over to one of the men coming out of the breaking corral, and walked to the house with her father who had come to meet her.

"Amy," the old man said gravely, "I've got to ask you to do something for your own good, and I would like it if you would not ask me my reasons for what I have to say."

"What is it, Pops?" she asked, taking his arm. "Anything for you."

"I'd rather you wouldn't see Hugh Ambler. I have my reasons."

"All right, if it will please you, I'll promise," she said. Then she added, "I mean, I'll make a deal with you on it. If you'll buy me a new dress, and a complete new outfit of clothes for Easter—"

The old man grinned ruefully. "I should have known you'd have to have something in return. You're a shrewd girl, Amy, and shrewd women sometimes get hurt. But it's a deal."

"It's a deal, Pops," she assured him as they went into the house for dinner.

It was about noon when Woodbine pulled out of the creek bottom and rode across his back ranch yard. At the corrals he saw Slim Longfellow and Dutch Karlton working on the mowing machine while Boots Wilkerson and his brother were patching up the hay frame on one of the wagon beds. Jess Hardracker, with his moustaches at an unusually mournful droop, was repairing the set of team harness.

Two wagons with the kegs of staples, post hole diggers, stretchers and other gear, stood without their teams under the shed. Leaning against the barn where Jess worked, there were a shotgun and two rifles.

Woodbine got down and came over and squatted by Jess. "Didn't get started fencing?"

"I didn't want to risk it," Jess said. "Your gunnies flew the coop. I paid 'em off out of my own pocket."

"What got the matter? Didn't like the cooking?"

"That wasn't it. One of 'em didn't show up last night when the rest come from town, but he came riding in a little after daylight. Seems he bumped into a friend of his in Fry's bunch of gunnies, and went home with him. Fry sends him over to offer them all more pay if they'd come over and work for him. They came and demanded their money, and all moved over to Fry's. I didn't want to send Slim and them out there in the open to build fence with no protection. It would be too much of an invitation to Fry to start shooting."

Woodbine took this intelligence without comment for a while, and then said, "You were right, of course.

I never liked the idea of gun-hands, anyway. We'll have to settle this ourselves."

"Where do we stand?" Jess asked.

Woodbine went over the happenings of the night and morning, and they discussed them for a while.

"Looks like you got Fry and Ambler both pushed in a corner," Jess observed. "They can't very well let things drop till it's settled. I don't see no use in building fence in the face of bullets, just to see it cut between every post the minute we're through—if we was lucky enough to get through with it."

Woodbine agreed with this decision. "You boys just stick around the place to see that they don't burn the house and barn down," he advised. "I'm going to keep pushing now until I bring it to a head. I've stirred 'em up enough so it shouldn't take long. Doc Ellis showed up?"

"That might be him now," Jess returned, pointing to a slowly moving speck of dust up the road. "Bob and them brought Moody's body, and told me about the fight up at the gap. I told 'em to dump it on the front porch. The calves are throwed in valley meadow. Merle and them went on to town, and Bob went on home."

By the time Woodbine was washed up, Doc Ellis had arrived. The doctor was a large man having a heavy face etched with the lines of his neighbors' troubles. He was quiet and efficient and didn't have much to say, for it was his duty to treat the halt and the lame without regard to their morals and without passing judgment upon them. Woodbine did not discuss the affair with him, for which the doctor was grateful.

"Now what was it you wanted me to do?" Doc asked. "Merle said something about an autopsy."

"Moody was shot twice," Woodbine said. "If both bullets are still in him, I'd like to have them. So far as I know, Moody has no family to object to an autopsy."

Doc laid down his bag and got his black alpaca coat off. "We'll have to get him laid out on a table of some

kind. Out in the shade of that sycamore tree would be good."

They made a pine table under the tree by placing three boards across saw horses, and the doctor set about his autopsy while the other men went out and dug a grave across the road on Fry's property. By the time they were through, Doctor Ellis had washed his hands and rolled down his sleeves, and was back at the front porch.

"Here are your bullets," he said. "The steel jacket rifle bullet went through his stomach and lodged against the backbone. The lead slug went in the bone under the eye and lodged in the skull. It's mashed out of shape, of course, but it's a .45, I'm certain."

Woodbine hefted the two bullets in his hand, then dropped them into his pocket. "About that rifle bullet first. The way the wound was, could it have killed Moody instantly?"

"Not a chance. It went through the intestines and liver, but it didn't strike his heart. He would have died either from internal bleeding in a few hours, or from peritonitis after a few days. But it was the bullet in the head that killed him."

Woodbine stored this information in his mind and said, "Thanks, Doc. We'll bury him after dinner. Come on and eat with us before you start back."

* * * * *

At about noon Noble Fry rode into his own place in a black humor. There were thirty gun-hands sitting in the shade of the bunkhouse, playing cards, talking and idling, and this did not improve his temper. He strode up to them and looked them over.

"I thought I told you last night that I wanted you to start today and pick up every Woodbine animal you found eating my grass. I'm going to pen them up and hold them for damages to my range in case he starts his fencing. What are you sitting around here for?"

A tall hairpin of a man by the name of Red Dog

was usually the spokesman for the bunch, and now he grinned insolently back at Fry.

"Well, I reckon you forgot our deal. Our wages was payable weekly in advance, and today is payday. Then, too, these new boys you hired, they kinda wanted to get their hands on their pay before they started to work. So, if you want to pay off, we'll take the money and get to work."

The man watched the effect of his ultimatum on Fry, and he saw Fry's face go blank for a moment.

"Don't worry about your pay," Fry assured him. I don't happen to have the money in the house at present, but I'll get it the first time I go to town. In the meantime, get to work."

"The boys don't like the idea of working without their pay in their pockets. You know how it is; a man might take a notion to travel sudden-like, and he'd want his money. Or something might happen to you, and where'd he get his pay? Or maybe you might run short of money and couldn't pay us, and where'd we be?"

"What do you mean by that hint?" Fry demanded. "Ain't my word good?"

"Money's better."

"You'll get it."

"When?"

"The first time I go to town, I told you. What's the matter, are you afraid I won't get it?"

Red Dog looked at Fry with a searching glance. "Some of the boys thought maybe you'd already got the money—and had maybe lost it. Maybe somebody had come into your house and stole it or something. In that case, there'd be a question whether or not you'd be able to get any more to pay us with. Little things like that worry people like us."

Fry searched Red Dog's face and saw nothing but the cynical smile. "What the hell do you know about me losing money?" he demanded.

"Oh, nothing," Red Dog shrugged. "I just happened to be in the house looking for you early this morning, and I saw your safe open and some blood on the floor.

Little things like that sometimes add up to big things, you know."

Fry tried not to reveal his worry to Red Dog, but the man's eyes were on him, and Fry saw that the man knew he had hit upon the truth.

"Well," Fry said, forcing a smile, "I was knocked over the head last night and robbed, but I know who did it, and I'll have the money back in a few days. You boys stick around."

Red Dog gave him a negative shake of the head while still holding his perpetual grin.

"No can do! The boys is sensitive to little things like that. They'd feel right put out if you was to ask 'em to do it."

Noble Fry weighed the situation and the result brought grave worry to him. Things had been piling up fast in the last few hours, and there could be an explosion at any time. Not that Woodbine had anything definite on him, but he, Fry, had the strong feeling that Woodbine was laying a fire under him and that it might burst into flame at any minute. There were too many unknown quantities here, and there was too much going on that he didn't know anything about. He needed these men.

"There's only one thing I can do," he explained. "I can ride to town and cash a check and pay you. You want to work until I get back?"

"I'll tell you," Red Dog answered. "We'll all ride in with you, then when you pay us we can take the rest of the day off and have a few drinks to celebrate our friends joining up with us." He turned to the crowd. "How about it, boys? Take your bedrolls, and if he don't pay us we can keep going. There's gonna be a dance over at Kiowa tonight, I hear."

That broke up the poker game, and the boys got to their feet and went into the bunkhouse to throw their rolls together. Fry's mouth went hard, knowing that he did not have enough money in the bank at Kiowa to cover the check he would have to ask Merle Roberson to cash for him. But that problem would have to wait.

The boys were pushing him into a corner, and he had the feeling he was going to need them.

They all rode to town and reached it in the middle of the afternoon. Fry rode on to Roberson's while the boys stopped off at the Parisian to wait for him.

Roberson, sitting in his office in the back of the store, heard Fry's story without comment.

"That two thousand you cashed for me recently, I had to send that away to cover some other debts. I need another thousand now, if you'll cash a check for me. You know how wages run up."

Roberson twiddled a pencil. "I just can't do it, Fry. I haven't got the cash to spare, and I can't get over to the bank at Kiowa for several days yet. You'd better just ask your boys to wait."

"They want their money."

"I understand. But I just can't cash your check this time," Roberson answered with a finality that Fry couldn't miss.

Fry got up and went out of the store trying to piece together the pattern of things that this sudden turn in events had torn apart for him. He sensed that things weren't going right and he sensed further that there was some kind of a showdown fast approaching. He walked down the street, went into a small saloon and had several drinks while he searched his fertile mind for a move to counter this bad break.

As he reviewed matters, a way suddenly came to him. He threw a silver dollar on the bar and walked down to Race Greer's stable.

"Race," he said, "I don't need those gun-hands any longer. They're waiting down at the Parisian for me to pay them for next week's work. Do me a favor, will you, and go down and tell them that the whole deal is off, and that they might as well drift."

"Off?" Old Race repeated, looking at him sharply. "You and Woodbine make up?"

"Not a bit of it. But I can handle him without putting out the money for those two-bit gun-hands. Go tell 'em."

"You sure you don't need 'em?" Race asked. "I was

going to ride out after a while and have a talk with you. You got any idea what's going on around here?"

"What do you mean?"

Race said, "Come on back here," and led the way to a feed room at the rear of the stable, where he went in and closed the door behind them. Seated on two full feed bags, the men faced each other.

"You always been a friend of mine, and a free man with a dollar," Race began. "This information might be worth something to you. You saw me with Merle and Woodbine and them others this morning. You know what they're up to?"

"Looking for Moody. So was I, and I found him first and killed him. Caught him running stolen cattle over the mountain."

Race shook his head wisely. "That's just part of it. You and Woodbine is at each other's necks, and Bob Burnham is in with Woodbine, of course. You know they got a case against you?"

"A case of what?" Fry asked sharply.

"Murder! I didn't hear all they said, them having their heads together. They found money in Moody's pockets that Merle remembered he'd given you. They know you was covering up something in not mentioning that money, and they figure it was money you paid Moody for killing Ab Sterling. Also, they got it doped out that you didn't have a battle with Moody there on the mountain, but that you murdered him. Two bullets, of different calibre, and the shots was fired a long time apart. The first bullet wouldn't have killed Moody, but would have wounded him and knocked him down. So you must have fired the second one to shut his mouth when you heard the posse coming. You had both guns, Fry. Moody didn't have one when we got there. They call that murder, and they're going to make a case against you with it. Murder, Fry! Woodbine plans to put your neck in a noose."

"And what are they going to use for evidence? The sound of those shots?"

"Them two bullets in Shay's body. Merle sent Doc Ellis out to Woodbine's to cut them out of Moody."

"And Woodbine is going to hold those bullets and hang me with them, is he?"

"Yep."

Fry got to his feet. "I won't forget that, Race. Just as soon as I get things straightened out around here I'll show you how much I appreciate it. So he's going to hang me with those bullets, is he?"

"He can danged near do it," Race said. "Them two bullets, and the whole posse hearing how far apart them shots were, and the money and everything. They don't think you told a straight story."

Fry turned and went out the door. "Thanks, Race. I'll sure fix you up for that. Just as soon as I attend to a few other matters. Go on down to the Parisian and break the news to those gunmen like I asked you, will you? I've got an errand to do."

He started out, paused uncertainly, then turned back and asked, "By the way, they didn't stumble over anything connected with Hugh Ambler, did they?"

"It was Ambler's horse Moody was riding."

"Ambler could give them an answer to that."

"And Woodbine back-trailed the cattle towards the creek crossing at Ambler's."

"Then the cattle had been hid on Ambler's place?"

"Sure," Race grinned. "You was kind of nervous this morning. Your story about finding the stuff at Moody's didn't check with Woodbine. He smelled it, and got busy looking for things to tear it apart. You'd better figure some way to cover yourself."

"Yeah," Fry said absently. "I think I've got a way. I'll be seeing you."

Fry speeded up his steps to his horse, mounted, and rode out of town rapidly.

THE afternoon had begun to get cool when Noble Fry rode into Hugh Ambler's clearing. Ambler had seen him from where he was chopping firewood, buckled on the pistol he had laid on a stump, and came forward to meet him, his face deliberately set into a blank expression.

Fry said, "Wanted to have another little talk with you, Ambler. Thought maybe we could still get together."

He made an effort to speak agreeably, but there was a false ring to his voice, for he did not like nor trust Ambler. He had seen too many of his own characteristics in Ambler to permit of anything but suspicion of him, and it was only the pressure of the growing danger which threatened him that brought him here.

Ambler pointed briefly to a stump, and then sat down on a log facing him and began rolling a cigarette and lighting it, making it apparent by his silence that it was up to Fry to do the talking. Fry saw this maneuver and it angered him, but he held his rage under a tight rein.

"We should have managed to get together before," Fry said with an effort at being persuasive. "We've almost got to do it now. For our own profit—and our protection."

"Protection?" Ambler arched his eyebrows.

"Yes. You need it, same as me. I'm doing you a favor telling you this, but here it is. Woodbine has got the deadwood on you. You've been sleeping stock around

here ever since you've been here, and now Woodbine has got you over a barrel. He's backtracked the stuff here, he's got your horse and the stock on his place, with the brands all vented to the D-in-a-C brand you use at Deerlick—

"He knows everything about you, Ambler, the same as I do," Fry lied. "About your being too handy with your gun down on the Brazos River five years ago, and about a whole herd that disappeared on the St. Joe trail a year before that."

"Now, listen," Ambler snapped. "Moody Shay couldn't have told him those things, because he didn't know them."

"Who said Moody Shay told him? A dead man can't talk, and you owe me for seeing to that."

"Oh, Moody's dead, is he? Woodbine didn't mention that."

"Didn't he? Ambler, Woodbine hasn't told half he knows about you. He's got a rope around your neck—unless you get busy in a hurry."

"About this Texas business," Ambler asked. "How'd you and him find that out?"

"I suppose he found it out like I did. I made a point of back-tracking you."

"You've got a hell of a lot of interest in my affairs. Why?"

"I spotted you a long time ago, and I like to know who I'm dealing with. Maybe Woodbine feels the same, but for a different purpose. Ambler, you can save your own neck, and I'm willing to help you, in exchange for your helping me. You know this fence trouble. Well, if you were to protect yourself by seeing that Woodbine wasn't around to hang you, it would, of course, solve my problem, too. In short, if Woodbine wasn't around, we would both have our problems solved. I'm offering to help you."

Ambler sat and reviewed Noble Fry's proposition, seeing clearly some of the things that lay behind it, and suspecting others. He recognized that Fry had been holding back this trump card for a time when he needed it desperately, and therefore he must be in

a pretty tight corner. Fry had come and walked into his, Ambler's, web, and Ambler had him where he wanted him.

"You want everything on the other side of the creek," Ambler said. "You planned to marry the Sterling girl and kill Woodbine, and you would have wanted to marry the girl before you killed Woodbine because the girl might not have married you if you had blood on your hands. But Woodbine has found out that you hired Shay to kill the girl's father, and she might know it by now, too. So you've got to get Woodbine out of the way before he hangs you, and so you want me to do the killing for you, to keep your hands clean before the girl. That's what you're trying to say, Fry. Isn't it?"

"What do you mean, I had Sterling killed?"

"Stop it," Ambler snapped. "I get around. You're afraid to face Woodbine with a gun, and you want me to kill him. Well, what's your offer?"

Noble Fry saw that this man's mind was almost a match for his own, and he hated him and feared him a little. But he was thinking that after he had got Ambler to pull the trigger on Woodbine, he, Fry, could kill Ambler as a cattle rustler, and he would have his problem solved. Woodbine's blood would not be on his hands, and Virginia Sterling could still be persuaded to marry him. That opened up the possibility of a lot of additional land, counting hers, Woodbine's and Ambler's.

"Now you're talking sense," he said to Ambler. "What do you want out of the deal?"

"It would be kind of nice if you and me, who understand each other, were neighbors, wouldn't it? You having all of one side of the creek and me the other."

Noble Fry looked at him with a sly grin. "Amy Churchill, eh?"

"She's a fool. I wouldn't want to be bothered with her."

"I see," Fry said. "Well, the old man's old, and hasn't got much time left, anyway. I suppose Churchill doesn't like you any more than Sterling liked me."

That's unhealthy, as Ab learned. All right, Ambler. I'll help you. As soon as you're ready after we get rid of Woodbine."

Ambler said, "I knew we could get together."

He knew that Fry had no intention of later helping him kill Churchill, because Fry would have to close Ambler's mouth as well as Woodbine's. Woodbine had to go, Ambler knew, not on Fry's account, but for Ambler's own safety. And then Ambler could play the same game Fry intended, and he could play it better. But first, having Fry along when he faced Woodbine would be some help.

Ambler got to his feet. "When do we move, partner?"

"Now," Fry snapped. "The quicker the better."

'It had been several years since Hugh Ambler had lived by his fast gun, and he had hoped that those days would not catch up with him. But they had, and he examined his feelings and found that he was going into this thing with all the cool nerveless ease which had helped him before. Nothing was changed. His plans were in jeopardy and he would have to eliminate a couple of men who were in his way. It was just that simple.

"Have you thought of anything to cover us?" Ambler asked.

He was thinking that Fry had manufactured some scheme which would throw the burden of guilt on Ambler, and he was not surprised at Fry's answer.

"I've thought of that, and the answer is so simple that it will be foolproof. Woodbine was at your place alone today. After he's taken care of, you can simply say that Woodbine caught you unarmed, charged you with rustling his stock, and threatened to shoot you on sight the next time he caught you armed. You would then be justified in defending yourself. Simple, and who can deny your statements?"

"As I recall it," Ambler said slyly, "you were going to be in on this. What's your alibi?"

"The same. Woodbine seemed to have lost his head and was going around threatening all of us. I ran into him near your place here and he told me the same."

"Simple enough, all right. But who's going to believe it?"

"With him dead, who's going to deny it? In the present case, I don't think we could back up a very elaborate yarn, do you?"

"Suits me," Ambler agreed, convinced that Fry intended to turn his own gun on Ambler the minute Ambler had killed Woodbine, and then would have an entirely different story of his own to tell. This did not worry Ambler, for he intended to beat Fry to that trick. Only one of the three men involved could live, and Ambler expected to be that man. Therein lay his only safety.

"One more thing," Ambler said. "Just where and when are we going to corner this gent?"

"One of my boys saw him riding to town with Doc Ellis. I imagine he's trying to persuade a committee to take you and me out and string us up, and then give us a fair trial. I've got three of my regular riders that are not too squeamish to lay a gun on Woodbine if there's a little bonus goes with the job. We'll go by my house and pick them up, and then we'll go on into town, scatter out and find Woodbine, and settle this business once for all."

"I'll saddle up," Ambler said, "and be with you in a minute. Way things are now, what can we lose?"

* * * * *

In a place where there was formalized law, this group of men would have been called a Grand Jury, but in Ashfork, where there was no legal structure, and there were no officers representing any form of government, it was merely a committee of responsible business men and ranchers who had been invited by Merle Roberson to come into the private room in the back of his store and hear the details of a situation which affected them all. They could hear the facts that were presented to them, and if the facts seemed to warrant action, they could take it upon themselves to appoint certain others of the decent element to act as

a court and execute any judgments handed down by that court. Such a court might under other circumstances be called a Kangaroo Court, and be subject to criticism, but in the circumstances under which these people lived, it was the only means they had of governing themselves.

There now sat in Roberson's room a dozen men whose integrity and fairness could not be questioned, and at the head of the pine table around which they were gathered, there sat old Enos Churchill, his shoulders bent with the weight of his hard years, and his face seamed by his experiences of the good and the bad in mankind, yet for all the lawlessness he had seen and been a part of, there was on his countenance the mellowing patina of a life well and justly lived.

Merle Roberson undertook to explain the gathering of these men in secret while Woodbine, who sat beside him, listened.

"You know, of course, that there has been some disagreement between Jim Woodbine and Noble Fry about Jim's intention of fencing his place. The things he has to tell you do not have any bearing on that problem, though that problem is what caused these things to come to a head.

"You will remember that my brother-in-law, Ab Sterling, was shot about a year ago or less in what was supposed to have been a hunting accident. Woodbine happened to see the bullet that was taken from Ab's body, and it was not a bullet which could have been fired from Ab's Winchester, but a lead one, such as is used in old Krag ammunition. Having nothing to go on but a suspicion, Jim kept the bullet and said nothing, but recently he found that Moody Shay owned a Krag. He had hoped to prove that Moody Shay killed Ab, possibly at the instigation of somebody else.

"But Moody was shot and killed this morning under circumstances which those of us who were there consider to be outright murder. No one actually saw the shot or shots fired which killed Moody, but the whole affair points to one conclusion; if it was murder, it well could have been for the purpose of silencing

Moody Shay, so that he could not testify against anybody else in the case of the murder of Ab. We base this belief on the fact that Moody Shay was mortally wounded but not killed outright by the first shot that struck him, and so couldn't have put up a fight, but he was later shot through the head and instantly killed at close range while a dozen of us were within close enough distance of the affair for our horses' hoof-beats to have been heard. What other purpose but to silence him, could a man have for killing a mortally wounded man?

"Woodbine can be considered to have a personal quarrel with Noble Fry, so he would not want to pass judgment in the matter. And I, as Virginia Sterling's uncle, would have to disqualify myself on account of a personal interest also.

"So we have asked you to come here to listen to the case Woodbine makes, to call such witnesses as can verify the things he says, and decide whether you think there is cause for a court to be appointed to establish the guilt or innocence of Noble Fry. Jim, if they're ready, tell them your story."

Jim Woodbine stood up and placed the old Krag bullet on the table, and beside it he placed the two bullets removed from the body of Moody Shay. And then he told them his story from beginning to end, indicating the things which were proven facts and the others which were surmises. He quoted Doctor Ellis' opinion on the death of Moody Shay. He told them about the stolen cattle, and about tracing them back to Ambler's Deerlick operations, and pointed out that they might not be connected with the case at all. He told them about the money found on Shay, and about Fry's failure to mention ownership or loss of it.

When Jim was through talking, Merle went out and came back with Moody Shay's Krag and the package of money. The committee matched the lead with that in the remaining live ammunition. They sent out for Doctor Ellis, and for Race Greer and other members of the posse, questioned them under promise of secrecy about the proceedings, and dismissed them.

Later they asked Jim Woodbine and Merle Roberson to leave the room while they discussed their findings and came to their decision. They were closeted and discussed the matter among themselves for an hour, and then sent for Merle Roberson and Jim Woodbine.

Old Enos Churchill said, "We are convinced that Moody Shay killed Ab Sterling, and it may have been at Noble Fry's instigation, but with Shay dead, there is nothing but speculation for us to go on, and so we do not feel that Noble Fry can be tried for Ab's death.

"But even though the evidence is circumstantial, we believe that Noble Fry murdered Shay. It is a pretty close thing, for if Fry or any of us had caught Shay running our cattle off, and if Shay had fought back, we would have killed Shay, and it would have been the only right thing to do. But as the evidence and the witnesses prove, that wasn't the case. There's no evidence that Shay put up a fight, and in fact, when the posse came up, Fry had his pistol in his hand and his rifle leaning against a tree. There's no evidence that Shay tried to, or even had the means of defending himself. We believe that Noble Fry should be tried for murder. And we believe that Hugh Ambler should be tried for cattle rustling while we're at it.

"We will appoint a judge and a jury, and a man to prosecute the case. Also, Fry will have a man to defend him. Fry will have to be brought in, and it may not suit him to acknowledge our right to try him. Woodbine, in the light of the fact that it is you who have brought this matter up, and since there might be some risk to innocent people in trying to pick Fry up and turn him over to the committee, it would seem only just that we appoint you to bring him in."

"If that is the wish of the committee, I will try to bring him to you," Woodbine answered.

As Woodbine walked towards the front door of Roberson's store he was still feeling his surprise at the committee's decision to have him pick Noble Fry up. Roberson, who went with him to the door, said:

"It might make more sense than it looks like, and I kinda lay that idea to Enos. Call it a kind of test. If Noble Fry is on solid ground, he'll be glad to get the chance to clear his name. If he's got a sense of guilt, he might object and put up a fight, and show his hand. And since you're the man that unearthed the trouble, it wouldn't be right to have somebody else fighting your battle for you, and maybe get killed. And on the other hand, since the committee thinks he's guilty, if you and Noble did fight about it, well, you'd kind of have official backing. I reckon it's not a bad idea, at that."

Roberson turned to wait on a woman customer who called to him, and Woodbine turned to go out. As he stepped out on to the boardwalk, he met Amy Churchill. Amy was gay, like a girl with a new toy.

"Hello, Jim," she smiled. "I was looking for my Pops. See him anywhere?"

"Yes, he's busy with some men in the back room right now," Jim returned. "You look happy."

"Who wouldn't be, with the Easter dance coming up in another two weeks. I made Pops bring me down to Mrs. Turner's. She's making me the prettiest dress you ever saw. Now, if I'm lucky enough to have some

poor lonesome cowpoke offer to take me to the dance, I'll be ready."

Jim's eyes caught the sight of a buggy coming out of the dusk, and he was watching it and did not see the coy look she gave him.

"Don't worry about that," he said absently. "You're pretty enough to get all the escorts you can handle."

"Do you think so?" she asked. "Are you going?"

The buggy pulled up at the livery stable, and Woodbine watched the two occupants get out. He did not have a ready answer for the girl, and she saw where his attention lay. Old Bob Burnham had got out of the buggy and was helping Virginia Sterling to alight.

"Lot of people in town tonight," the girl said with a trace of malice in her voice.

"Yes," Woodbine answered vaguely. "Well, it was nice seeing you again. I'll have to run along."

He started to leave, but the girl took his arm. "Jim," she said, and there was an intense quality about her voice that brought Woodbine's attention back to her. "Jim, I've got to tell you something."

He looked at her, and she did not release his arm as she glanced down the street and saw Virginia Sterling watching her.

"You know, Jim, that our families have always been close together. We've been good friends. You were kind enough to promise you wouldn't tell Pops about me seeing Hugh Ambler. Well, I can repay the favor, Jim. I wouldn't tell you so much of my private affairs if it weren't that I thought you and I were so close together."

"Don't tell me you've married him?"

"No, Jim, and I won't. He's bad. I've just learned it, and from his own lips. He intends to help destroy you, or at least stand by and watch you destroyed, and then step in and take your land. He might have even killed you if he'd had to. I wouldn't put it past him."

"Thanks for telling me." Woodbine assured her. "But don't let him worry you. I'm not worried about his hurting me."

The girl's hand gave his arm an increased pressure

as her glance went again towards Virginia Sterling, who was approaching with Bob Burnham. "But I am, Jim. I'm terribly worried."

"Forget it, like I'm going to do," Jim Woodbine answered. He tipped his hat. "I'll see you later. Right now I've got an errand to do."

He walked on down and met Bob Burnham and Virginia, and he was thinking of that last sight of her, when he had kissed her and she had turned and fled. He had not had much time to ponder that action, and he did not know how she felt towards him.

When he stopped before them he studied her face and knew that she was laboring under some great emotion. He did not know what it was, but he suspected that she was unforgivably angry with him.

Without waiting for a greeting, she asked, "Jim, why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?" He did not like dissembling, but it was difficult to follow the workings of her alert mind, and he had no intention of criticising Noble Fry to her, and thus arousing her defence of the man. He wanted that to come from others after they had decided the matter.

She was blunt under the stress of her emotions. "Bob told me everything. I knew something was in the air when he stayed out all night, and I made him tell me. Why hadn't you told me these things before?"

Bob quickly interjected his defence, but there was a sheepish look about him. "Look, Jim," he said. "I explained that you would not make those charges against Noble until you knew absolutely what you was doing, but you know how she is. She just wormed it out of me."

"Forget it, Bob," Woodbine answered, then said to Virginia, "I know Fry is a friend of yours. I'm not trying to persecute him, nor to drive him out of the country. If he's all right, I'll face the music. You shouldn't have come to town tonight."

He still could not tell what was in the girl's mind, but she offered a reason for being here. "I came to see

Merle," she explained. "I've got to know what the end of this is going to be."

"It might be a good idea for you to talk to him," Woodbine agreed. He saw that Bob had not completely convinced her of Fry's character, and that her belief in the man was not dying easily.

"It might be a good idea for you to see him with me. Or it might be a still better idea, if we could find Noble, for us all to sit down and talk it over," she countered.

This hurt him. He looked at her with eyes that had been made to see her anew after the kiss of last night, and there were in her things that he had not seen before. She was no longer a tomboyish neighbor girl with a freckled face and an ability to torment the life out of a young fellow, but she was a beautiful woman, with the depths of a woman's nature, and the spirit and the fire, and the promise of a great and unfailing love for the man who won her.

These things he saw, and it came to him that he had seen them too late. His chance had come and gone without his having had the eyes to see it. His instinct told him that by attacking the man she had so admired he had destroyed his own chances of winning her loyalty, for she was not the one to have been won by such a trick.

Woodbine saw that he could not come to her under such circumstances, and yet this impasse was not of his deliberate making. He had set about fencing his place for his own sound reasons. He had hoped to convince her of the soundness of her doing the same, and when this had failed, he had felt convinced that while he was doing the job Noble Fry would somehow reveal to Virginia that his reasons for not wanting the fences up were based entirely on greed, and that this would in turn convince her that she would do right to fence her own land before Fry had destroyed its worth. That was his sole purpose, and it was a far cry from fighting a man for this girl's affections.

The bitter thought came to him now as he looked at her loveliness that in fighting to protect the interests

of a friend he had destroyed his chances for happiness.

"I'm sorry," he said with a sudden weariness, "but I can't go with you right now. I've got an errand to do."

Virginia looked at him queerly, and said, "She's pretty, isn't she? And mysterious."

"Who?" Woodbine's face was blank with surprise.

"Amy. She's a lovely girl, and the man who gets her is to be congratulated."

Amy Churchill had been so far from Woodbine's mind that it took him a long moment to understand the thing that Virginia had meant to imply.

"I haven't time for dates right now," he said, and watched her take Bob's arm and walk towards Roberson's store.

Then he turned and went down to a side street restaurant where he ordered supper. It was dark now, and he was tired and hungry, and not in a good mood. Somehow all the things he had gone through in the last two days did not seem worth the trouble. He did not relish having to ride out to Fry's and bring the man in.

Old Race Greer was sitting in front of his Elite Livery Stable with his chair leaned back against the wall under the light over the entrance doors when five horsemen rode in out of the dark and dismounted. Race got up and came in to take over the animals.

"Howdy, Noble. Howdy, Ambler. Town's kinda fillin' up tonight. You'd think there was a dance or something."

Fry was in no mood for humor, and he said, "Don't unsaddle 'em. Just water and feed 'em, and then put the bridles back on and leave 'em standing."

"Reckon you ain't staying long," Greer commented.

"No, we're not. You said the town was filling up. Who all is in?"

"Oh, Enos Churchill and his daughter come in for her to do some shopping. And Bob Burnham's in with Virginia, and Jim Woodbine and a lot of others."

"Sounds like a gathering," Fry said. "Got any idea of anything special going on?"

"Yes, I have. But it's secret."

"I see," Fry answered. "In that case, I don't reckon anybody that's not in on the secret knows what it's all about."

"I wouldn't say that," Race Greer grinned knowingly.

Fry scratched his chin. "I wanted to see you a minute. Got a place where we could talk?"

"Back in the feed room," Greer answered, leading the way.

"Wait here," Fry said to the others, and followed Greer to the feed room and closed the door behind him.

"Now, what is it, Greer?"

"I shouldn't mention it," Greer hedged. "I like a man that pays well for what he gets, but there's some that takes and then forgets to pay."

Fry took a few gold pieces out of his pocket, picked out two of them and dropped them into Greer's outstretched hand.

Greer's face fell. "This is important information. Matter of life and death, and I was sworn to secrecy."

Fry picked off another pair of the Double Eagles and added them to the two in Greer's hand, and Greer pocketed them.

"They're having a committee meeting at Roberson's, and they called us all in to testify. They've made up their minds," Greer said.

"And what did they decide?"

"They've got the dogwood on you, Fry. They've decided that you're guilty, and they're going to try you for murder. You're convicted before the trial starts."

"Like hell I am," Fry swore. "And I suppose Woodbine is right in the middle of it?"

"In on it?" Greer repeated. "It's Woodbine that's done it all. He's the man that's putting the noose around your neck. The others are just around, backing him up."

Noble Fry said absently, "Yeah, I thought so. Well, thanks, Race. Keep those horses ready."

"You gonna look him up?" Race asked, following Fry out the feed room door.

"I'm going to do just that. That rannyhan has got his loop mixed up in my business for the last time."

At the front door where the others waited, Fry said, "You three boys go on and scatter around and see if you spot Woodbine. If you do, come back and let me know where he is. If you don't see him, just kind of mill around and pick up what you can hear. But don't go around the Parisian tonight. That's the first place anybody would go to look for you. Ambler and I will be around somewhere."

When Fry's three hardcase riders disappeared towards the lighted part of town, Ambler asked, "What's the word? He know anything?"

"Plenty! The committee had him on the carpet today as a witness. Woodbine's spilled his guts to them, and they've decided that they're going to hang you and me side by side as soon as they can lay hands on us and give us a kind of mock trial. Woodbine will be the witness against us."

"If he lives," Ambler amended.

"If he lives," Fry repeated. "But he's in town, and I don't see any reason why he should live that long. That man will have completely wrecked our playhouse on this range if he lives to appear against us. We can't afford to wait any time at all. We've got to shoot on sight if there's a thousand people see it."

Hugh Ambler had felt the searing caress of hang-noose on his neck, and an old fear arose in him again, a fear that convinced him of the necessity for the reckless destruction of Woodbine on sight, and then escape if there was no way to justify the killing.

"You're right," he agreed. "And maybe I can give you some pointers on this business. I know something about it. You take one side of the street, and I'll take the other. When one of us passes a light, the other stays in the dark. One of us can keep his attention while the one in the dark can get in a shot. It's a sure way."

"All right," Fry said. "You cross the street. I'll go up this side."

Ambler looked and saw that there were more lighted

windows in the blocks across the street than on the side Fry chose for himself, and as he turned away there was a cold smile on his face. Ambler knew how to make use of the dark Fry preferred to hide in.

NOBLE FRY stood in the darkness of a wooden awning over the saddle shop. There was a narrow passageway between the shop and the adjoining building, and Fry had selected this place for the reason that it offered a good retreat if that were necessary.

He stood here watching the few moving forms that passed through the patches of light on the sidewalk in front of the few stores still open. His eyes repeatedly returned to the lights at Roberson's store, where he knew that things were going on that affected his very life.

There were black thoughts in his mind. Even if he managed to get Woodbine killed, and then Ambler, who also knew too much about him for his safety, his position here would not be comfortable, for there would still be those who would believe him guilty of the charges, even if they were not proved. Virginia might even doubt him. In any event, the plans he had made seemed to have crashed down over his head in these last two days, and he saw little hope of picking them up and rebuilding them here. Maybe he could get Virginia to marry him and sell out here and go somewhere else for a new start.

He could not understand why things had turned against him with such suddenness. Woodbine was to blame for that, but it seemed to him that Fate had dealt him a treacherous blow in knocking him over when he was so near to success. He had a sharp mind; he could plan and he could drive on to the execution

of those big plans and schemes while smaller men dawdled and lived little and timid lives with no hopes of splendid things such as he deserved.

He searched the recent events to see where he had made his errors, and he could not find anything for which to blame himself except the lie he had told when he had killed Moody Shay. This was hardly his fault, since he had had so little time to frame his story before the posse was upon him. Perhaps he would yet have the chance to explain away the discrepancies in his story, and then everything would be all right again.

He saw Virginia Sterling come out of Roberson's and start walking towards him, her heels clicking on the boards of the walk, and her form passing through the patches of light from the windows between them.

He waited in the complete darkness until she was upon him, and then he called her name. She saw the more solid black of his shadow as he stepped out from his hiding place and stood before her, still in darkness too deep to be observed from across the street.

"I wanted to see you," he said.

"You frightened me," she answered. "I have to go to see Mrs. Ellis."

"You can spare a moment, Virginia. This is important."

She remained silent, and he formed the words of his last remaining hope. "Virginia, I have been the victim of a series of scandalous lies that Woodbine has built up about me. There is no law here except that which men make, and they cannot be trusted to administer justice. I am in danger. This should not be the time to bring this up, but I am forced to speak now. I have wanted to ask you for a long time if you would marry me—"

"Stop it!"

The girl's voice was edged with anger.

"But, Virginia—"

"I have just come from the committee. They are all honest and just men. They have told me about what happened to my father—"

"Virginia, you can't believe that! No court in the world would convict me—"

"No court is going to convict you. But we are not a court of law. We are just people who have to depend on our own poor senses in forming our judgments. I know the whole story and I believe like they do that you had my father killed. That is enough for me."

He felt the hot anger in her words, and somehow by contrast they brought to him with a sickening clarity the knowledge that if he had played his cards right she would have been his, for he had sensed that she had looked upon him with interest. And this made the taste of his loss the more bitter.

There was a moment of awkward silence and then she said, "They are going to try you for murder. I am telling you this so that you will have time to go away, for they will surely hang you."

Surprised and feeling an upsurge of hope, he asked, "Virginia, are you still that much interested in me?"

"No," she answered, "I am not. If they hung you, it would be only what you deserve. I have other reasons."

There was cold irony in his voice when, in the final death of his hope, he asked, "If it is any of my business, what is there about my life that makes you so concerned with helping me save it?"

"The committee has sent Jim Woodbine out to bring you in. He will meet you face to face, not slip up behind your back. I don't want you to slip up behind his back."

"I see," Fry answered quietly. "Now it's Woodbine. Before that, it was me. Who will it be next?"

"I have offered you a chance to save your life," she returned coldly. "A chance you don't deserve. You thank me with insults. I have nothing more to say to you."

"You offer me my life to save that of another man." Noble Fry laughed a bitter laugh. "Woodbine is after me, and you don't want me to hurt him. Well, I am

after him, too, and after what he has cost me, there is no mercy in me."

"I see now that there never was," she said, and turned and left him.

He turned and walked back into the passage-way between the buildings, knowing now that there was nothing left for him in Ashfork except his vengeance upon the man who had brought his downfall. But there was such a heedless anger in him that he would risk staying here until that job was done, despite the shadow of the noose around his neck. He could take care of that matter later, for he was still a smart man.

Woodbine had finished his dinner and bought a cigar and lighted it, and now he had come out of the restaurant and was walking towards the livery stable to get his horse. He did not suspect that Fry was in town, and he intended riding out to Fry's ranch to get him. It was a distasteful job, and he wanted to get it over.

He was somewhere near Tudery's bar when the shot came out of the darkness and knocked him down on his face. The cigar fell out of his mouth and his hat rolled into the gutter. The bullet had struck him in the side, numbing him and knocking his breath out. He gasped while his instinct of self-preservation started him crawling on hands and knees out of the light of the store window and towards the darkness.

A second shot sent splinters out of the boardwalk to gouge his face. He got into the darkness and pulled himself to his feet with the aid of the building wall, leaning his back against it for support and drawing his weapon.

The shots had come from between two buildings across the street, and he stood and waited until the third shot came, and when it did he saw the tiny flash from the gun and fired at it. When the fourth shot came, he slid down to one knee as the bullet pinged into the wall near him. He was in the dark and made a poor target. The ambusher was in the dark and could not see the sights of his own gun, and consequently was aiming only by instinct.

The ambusher fired one more shot, and then there

was a long moment's silence while Woodbine knew the man was reloading, confident that he had Woodbine pinned down. Woodbine knew he was pinned down, and in his exposed position, he would not have an opportunity to reload. He held his fire.

Down the street Virginia came out of Doctor Ellis' house, and up the street there were people coming out of doors. Merle Roberson came out with a shotgun, followed by Bob Burnham with his pistol in his hand, and the men of the committee. Farther up, three men came out of the Parisian and started running towards the shooting.

Roberson and Burnham recognized Fry's men and knew then what the shooting was about. Roberson shouted across the street at them. "Hold it up, boys, I've got buckshot in this gun."

Burnham also covered the men, and shouted, "Come on over here and stand hitched."

Two of the men obeyed, but the third one ran down the street.

Roberson fired at him and missed, and Tudery came running out of the Rattlesnake with his sawed off double barrel. Roberson shouted, "Stop him, Tudery. Hold him down."

Tudery let out a blast and the man stopped in his tracks and raised his hands. "Over here, mister," Tudery barked, and the man walked towards him.

Then Woodbine's ambusher had his gun reloaded, and he came out of his hiding place between two buildings, and he was Hugh Ambler. He shouted Fry's name and said, "We got him. Rush him."

Fry came out from his passage-way on the same side of the street as Woodbine, and started walking, his and Ambler's paths converging towards Woodbine.

Woodbine, down on one knee and with the wall helping him support his weakening body, measured the chances between the two men, and turned his gun on Ambler as the most dangerous.

Ambler was in the middle of the street now. He stopped and spread his feet in a shooting stance, raised

his gun high and brought it down slowly on the dark shadow which was Woodbine's form.

Woodbine aimed his gun by instinct as he would point his finger in the darkness, and pulled the trigger. Ambler grunted as the slug knocked him down on his back. He rolled over and started crawling back towards his hiding place.

Noble Fry's scheming mind worked fast. Woodbine was not the man to go on and kill a wounded man crawling away from a fight, and Ambler might live to talk. In the excitement of battle nobody would be able to remember the details of the fight, and with Woodbine wounded and down, Fry could handle him alone. This was the moment of opportunity. Fry took a slow and careful aim and killed Ambler just as the crawling man had almost reached his place of concealment.

Then he turned and started moving towards Woodbine. Woodbine had seen the murder, and now still down on a knee, he moved his body so that he was facing Fry.

"Stop where you are, Fry," he said. "I don't want to kill you."

"Don't you?" Fry taunted. "That's right kind of you." He fired, and his bullet whistled past Woodbine's ear.

"Drop your gun, Fry, and walk towards me. You'll get a fair trial."

"When? After they hang me?"

Fry fired again, and when he saw that Woodbine did not fall, he cursed and started running directly towards him. In his bitter defeat he had lost all his sense of caution, and now there was left in him only the killing instinct of a cornered animal. He fired two more shots with foolish abandon as he ran, and then seemed to realize his mistake.

He stopped in his tracks, lifted his gun and brought it down to bear on Woodbine. Then Woodbine pulled his trigger carefully. His bullet knocked Fry down into a sitting position, and Fry sat there a moment, stunned. Then he lifted his weapon high, cursed, and brought it down again slowly.

Woodbine steadied his own gun and sent a merciless bullet through Fry's heart. Fry's gunhand settled down into the dust, and the reflex action of the muscles in his dead arm finished pulling the trigger, and his gun sent its last slug harmlessly into the dirt beside him. Fry's body sank slowly over on his gun and he was dead.

Woodbine sank to a sitting position with his back against the store wall, his feet outstretched. He dropped his gun, and bowed his head, and there came over him the greatest weariness that he had ever known. He was thinking, "Now it's done, and it wasn't worth the effort. She'll hate me the rest of my days. I'll sell out and go somewhere else, where I won't have to see her."

He must have dozed off, because the next thing he knew he was lying in a clean white bed, and Mother Ellis was stirring about him. There were the voices of his friends in the other room, but Virginia was here, sitting on a chair right against the bed. Mrs. Ellis smiled at him and discreetly left the room.

He looked at Virginia and there came to him the keen sense of his great loss. He said, "I guess you know all about it now. I'm sorry, Virginia, I didn't want to shoot him. If I had it to do all over again, I wouldn't do it. It's not worth it."

"You did right," Virginia said. "He was vile at heart. I saw him deliberately shoot Ambler in the back while the man was crawling away. Now I know that everything you suspected about him must have been true. I was blind, Jim."

"So have I been," Jim said. "I've made a mess of things, and I'm selling out and going away."

"You and Amy?" she asked in a voice that she tried to control.

"No. Not since I've kissed you. There won't be anybody else."

Virginia laughed, and there were tears in her laughter, and she dropped down on to her knees beside the bed and had her arms around his neck, and her voice was soft close to his face.

"Jim, we've been through a lot, and it's about time

we grew up. How could you and I live without each other to argue with? We were not born to sit and vegetate and be placid; we have our disagreements because we are bound so closely to each other. But there are other strong moments, Jim—”

His lips found hers, and he knew some of the glory those other moments promised. The weariness was gone from him, and the future here was filled with her presence, full of fire, and of tenderness, and the joy of living for all time to come.

HE HAD TO DIE!

Two ruthless killers were gunning for Jim Woodbine — the only man who could put a noose around their necks.

One was Hugh Ambler, a cold, death-dealing machine, scheming to get rich on the land of his fallen neighbors.

The other was Noble Fry, ruthless baron of the range, who liked to have his killing done for him.

Then the law sent Woodbine to bring them in. But the only law they knew was at the business end of a gun!

A MACFADDEN BOOK



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